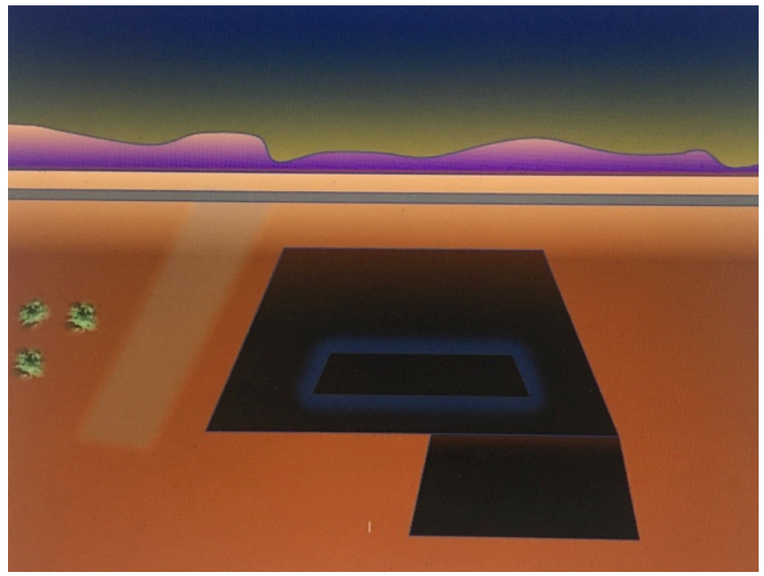


# HiT–G

*A Christocentric Science Fantasy*

Neil C. Damgaard
2023

# Influences, Acknowledgements

My writing cannot but admit to influence by a number of authors over the years. In different ways, I wish I could be like each of them. I first read J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in 1967 in the unauthorized Ace Books edition, followed years later with the official release of *The Silmarillion.* My young mind was fascinated and enthralled with Tolkien's vision for a clear "good" and a clear "evil" in the cosmos. His friend, C.S. Lewis, authored books that also entered my affections: *The Chronicles of Narnia, the Space Trilogy, The Great Divorce,* and others. In the 1980s and after, I read a good number of novels by Tom Clancy, beginning with the 1984 Naval Institute Press book, *The Hunt for Red October*. His attention to technical detail, if tedious for many readers, always attracted me. Frank Peretti wrote Christian novels that dared to imaginatively explore the spiritual realm, indulging his speculations about angels and demons. With some nervousness, I found his early works intriguing. Finally, later in life, I have come to appreciate the great mind and spirit of Jonathan Edwards. His thinking and quest for a solid doctrine of redemption has been inspiring to me. All of these writers speak into my production of this novel, which I call a "Christocentric science fantasy." It has science, or imagined science embedded. It has criminal intrigue and it is incidentally Christian. Of this aspect, the influences in my life have, by *gratia*, been numerous.

Cynthia Price and Marie Anderson graciously read the story, as it unfolded. Janet Taylor served as editor and her labors are much appreciated.



# Dedication

I dedicate this novel to my two daughters, Jocelyn and Susanna, who themselves each became lovers of good writing. That is due in part to the example of good reading given by their mother, Renée, who has always granted me warm support and a kind interest in my endeavors.

Neil C. Damgaard, BS, ThM, DMin
Roanoke, Virginia
March 2023

# Preamble

Things happen. Sometimes their explanation can be discovered and sometimes it is elusive. Sometimes these happenings remain a mystery. In every community on the planet, there reside philosophers, scientists, reporters, clerics, poets, cracker-barrel soothsayers, law enforcement officers and governors who seek to fathom the causes and reasons of these mysterious things that happen. They research and pontificate and prognosticate. Not infrequently they draw energy for themselves and a sense of purpose from the things that happen and their attempts to discover their reasons. Some find themselves rewarded with esteem and political advantage. Saints do all these things too. But they also bring a different perspective. An ancient Irish *lorica*, a prayer of protection whose roots go back fifteen hundred years, cried out to God:

> Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;
> Thou my best thought, by day or by night; Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Almost three thousand years ago, these words were scribed by a Jewish king:

וְרָאִיתִי אָנִי שֶׁיֶּשׁ יִתְרָון לַחָכְמָה מִן־הַסִּכְלוּת כְּיִתְרָון הָאֹור מִן־הַחֹשֶׁךְ׃
הֶחָכָם עֵינָיו בְּרֹאשֹׁו וְהַכְּסִיל בַּחֹשֶׁךְ הֹולֵךְ וְיָדַעְתִּי גַם־אָנִי שֶׁמִּקְרֶה אֶחָד יְקָרֶה אֶת־כֻּלָּם׃

Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all.

Ecclesiastes 2:13,14

Almost two thousand years ago, these words were written by a Christian apostle, upon command to do so:

ἐγενόμην ἐν πνεύματι ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ καὶ ἤκουσα ὀπίσω μου φωνὴν μεγάλην ὡς σάλπιγγος λεγούσης· ὃ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον καὶ πέμψον ταῖς ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαις· εἰς Ἔφεσον καὶ εἰς Σμύρναν καὶ εἰς Πέργαμον καὶ εἰς Θυάτειρα καὶ εἰς Σάρδεις καὶ εἰς Φιλαδέλφιαν καὶ εἰς Λαοδικίαν.

I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches,



to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

Revelation 1:10,11

Christian churches come and go. All of the seven churches of the Revelation are long gone. In the case of early Colossae, the first church there receiving one of Paul’s “divinely inspired” letters perhaps in A.D. 60 or 61, the entire city is now completely gone. Only the wind is heard now across the barren Tel of ancient Colossae and only a few stones litter the twenty-two acres of the site today. The early churches had no buildings of their own, of course. Those later patristic assemblies which would eventually build structures would soon enough see them buried, besieged, looted, turned into mosques, bulldozed, covered up or swallowed up in sandstorms. That was the fate of the earliest known Christian house church building, within the buried city of Dura-Europos, in modern Syria. It lay entombed in sand, abandoned from A.D. 257 until Yale University dug it up in the 1930s, disassembled it and transported it in crates to New Haven, Connecticut. Chunks of the original 4th century Basilica Paleocristiana in Paestum, Italy are easily viewable today. In Spain, I viewed ruins of old Spanish churches, which have lain or stood in silence since before the Protestant Reformation even occurred. The Church of England church tower at Jamestown, Virginia is the earliest colonial English structural remnant in North America. It goes back to about 1680. I know one Christian church in Massachusetts that began in 1694, still remains today and has roots traceable to the Plymouth Pilgrims. My point: I suspect it is rarely Providence for any one Christian church to last for more than a century or so. The spiritual and enduring purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ is not just self-perpetuation. The purpose of the Church is to spread of the Gospel complemented by healthy body life which facilitates the ongoing spread of the Gospel. Of course, this is annoying to any current generation of church members who often fantasize (nobly enough) that their church is the center of the spiritual universe.

Which brings us to this story. We enjoy fantasy. We also appreciate science. If the two can be brought around Christ, this is a good thing! And so, I have called this story a “Christocentric science fantasy.”

## The Major Movements in This Story


The Mystery
Sections 1 to 26

The Conspiracy
Sections 27 to 49

The Relationships
Sections 50 to 70

Targeting the Capitol
Sections 71 to 77

The Attack
Sections 78 to 83

Friendships Deepen, the Explanation, and Another Mystery
Sections 84 to 88

The Really Bad Guys and What Happened to Them
Sections 89 to 106

Aftermath
Section 107




# The Mystery

1

As dawn approached, Pastor Victor Moniz rose from his bed and stretched his arms upward. He glanced at his wife, Rosaria, still asleep, and whispered to the Lord, “Thank you for all the blessings which I enjoy and which I too often take for granted.” He looked out the window at the horizon, to a beautiful sunrise, viewable from his house most mornings. It was the Lord’s Day and his mind was already ticking off the duties, activities, and challenges of the day. He loved the Lord’s work and usually anticipated Sundays with joy. He was invariably the first to arrive at his church, usually about six o’clock.

It was his practice to not listen to the radio, check his phone, or look at any newspaper early on Sunday mornings. He wanted as clear and fresh a mindset as possible as he joined in with his people to the flow of worship and instruction. He pulled out of his driveway and drove the three miles to his church, the Santa Fe Christian Assembly in Santa Fe, New Mexico where he had served as pastor for fifteen years. The sun was beginning to crest the peaks and tree line of the Santa Fe National Forest to the east. As Victor approached the church he abruptly slammed on his brakes and the car jolted to a halt. Where his church should have been there was nothing. A large hole in the ground gaped across the lot. Victor sat in stunned silence, both afraid and shocked. He levered the stick into park, engine idling. No one else was around, and since the church lot lay in a sparse part of the wider city, no one was passing by. He was alone for the moment and silent. He looked at the hole, neatly carved at its edges. Strangely, the thought occurred to him that a bomb explosion or a meteor-hit would leave wreckage or a smoking, ragged edge to the . . . hole—there was no other word for it. The hole was oblong shaped and its edge had the appearance of a neatly clipped haircut, as if by design. He turned his engine off, slowly opened the car door, and then nervously climbed out. The air was warm and there was a gentle breeze. There was also a faint smell like honey or nectar, which really confused Victor. Normally the dry air was odorless. No, that was not his imagination . . . he detected a pleasant, sweet smell which he couldn’t quite identify.

He gingerly walked over to the edge, almost like he expected some new fissure to open up and swallow him. But there were no tremors and no noise. Complete silence. As he peered into the hole, he could just about see the bottom. He didn’t

know why he expected an endless black. Too many sci-fi movies probably. The sun was not up yet, but the bottom of the hole seemed to be about fifty feet down. The bottom was flat and looked almost like prepared soil for construction, for the pouring of concrete or the laying of asphalt. It dimly stared back up at him, mocking his helpless need for an explanation.

“What do I do?” he muttered to himself. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit the button to call Rosaria. He had only left her about twenty minutes ago and she was probably still sleeping.

“Hello?” came the gravelly answer.

“Rosaria,” he said, “Pull some clothes on and come to the church right now.”

“What?” she said. “I just woke up.”

Victor snapped, “Yes just do it. Right now. Hurry please.”

“OK,” Rosaria said, detecting an urgency and fear. After ten minutes her car ground to a halt next to his. She did not get out but sat motionless. She began to shake as Victor came to her door. She rolled down the window but said nothing. He also said nothing. There was no explanation and it was so surreal.

2

They stood there in silence, staring at the hole. The word “shock” did not do justice to how they were feeling. Victor shuffled around, went to the edge and looked in again, then shuffled back to Rosaria’s side. He looked up and around. Nothing else was unusual, except the faint fragrance. She noticed that too. “What is that smell?” she muttered.

“I don’t know.” She took his hand for a minute then dropped it. Rationality had not returned yet. They were both without words.

Then Rosaria’s phone chirped. In the quietness, it startled her. She pulled it out and almost dropped it. She looked at the screen and saw an incoming call from her friend, Sophia. It was 6:35 a.m.



“Hello,” she croaked into the cell.

“Ro! I can hardly talk but I had to call you. Stephen and I are at our church. But it isn’t there!”

Sophia burst into tears and Rosaria could hear her sobbing. Stephen and Sophia are Victor and Rosaria’s best friends in Santa Fe. Stephen is pastor of New Beginnings Fellowship, a sister congregation located about five miles from Santa Fe Christian Assembly. The Monizes and the Menendezes shared friendship because they were both ministry couples, and neither had any children. Their churches were friendly, as much as two distinct congregations might be. Victor and Stephen had attended seminary together and then, by appearance of chance, found themselves in the same city ministering as colleagues. Victor had been at Christian Assembly for fifteen years. Stephen came to New Beginnings seven years ago. Rosaria and Sophia became friends by proximity of their husbands and grew to like each other and, as much as pastors’ wives can find the time, offered each other support and good friendship.

“Sophia, stop crying. Tell me what is wrong.” Rosaria collected her words. Victor still just stood, staring into the hole.

“I don’t know what to say, Ro. We are at church—but there is no church! We are standing here looking into a big hole where our church was. Steve just ran over to the other side of the hole,” Sophia said, and Rosaria dropped her phone. It bounced to the edge of the hole but did not fall in. She bent down and retrieved it, now holding tighter and backing away from the edge.

“Sophia! I dropped my phone, are you there still?”

“Yeah, Ro I’m here—I don’t know what has happened. Could a meteor have hit? Did terrorists do this?”

“What?” replied Rosaria, “Did you say your church is gone?”

“Yes, that is what I said. I am in shock. Steve is over on the other side just walking back and forth.”

“Sophie! That is what has happened to *our* church too. We are here at our church—or where it used to be, and there’s this hole. And this strange smell—it’s not a bad smell, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. Honey maybe?”

Sophia came back, “Wait. Yeah, I smell that too. Ro what has happened?”

3

Bob Cohen had been in the Navy, a SEAL in fact, when he was younger. Now he lived in Santa Fe and ran a news website of which he was proud. He prided himself in the network of news scrounging that he managed. If something happened in Santa Fe, small or large, he was usually the first to hear about it. People—all kinds of people—sent him phone videos, pictures, and quick, on-the-street interviews long before the newspapers or television reporters could get there. In his Jeep, Cohen moved from coffee shop to coffee shop, receiving news tidbits and stories from people all day long. He processed the stories, verified them, and then posted them on his site. He called it Santa Fe Day. After he monetized it with advertising income, he was able to make a decent living on the news. He was a cynical guy and took no small pleasure in getting the scoop on his print and broadcast competition. But it was exhausting, pretty much a seven day a week job, which left little time for a social life or entertainment.

Just before seven o’clock, Cohen was starting to awaken. He rolled out of the bed in his RV, next to which was parked his Jeep. He rented a large space from Santa Fe Bank and Trust. He only drove the RV occasionally. He stepped out onto the parking lot, rubbed his eyes, and noted the beautiful sunrise. Stepping back inside, he pulled a bottle of orange juice from the small fridge and sat down at the small desk with the large computer monitor. Seventeen posts on his site, and he didn’t recognize any of these names.

He clicked on the first post. “Church disappears. No explanation. Massive gaping hole left.” Hickox Street.

Cohen thought that was lame.



Next: “My church is gone. Just gone. Why O God?” Alameda Street. Cohen’s eyes opened fully now.

Next: “A large cavern now yawns where the Church of the Holy Spirit once sat. The church people are starting to arrive for early service. Everyone shocked. No one knows what has happened.” Photo included. Aqua Fria Street.

More clicks. Same stories. Churches just gone. Then Cohen noticed Temple Beit Lehem had disappeared. Rabbi stopped by to open building for school board breakfast fund-raiser but no building. Large hole in ground all that remains.

His computer screen started bleeping notifications of more and more of the same phenomena. Churches all over Santa Fe and two synagogues so far were gone. In the night, apparently. No fire alarms had been tripped. Security cameras in the neighborhoods and alarm systems were all down, off, disabled.

He wrote on a pad next to his monitor: WTF. Then, for some reason it occurred to Cohen that none of the disappeared churches were Catholic. And there were a number of those in Santa Fe, at least fifteen by a very quick Google check. He scanned the postings still coming in—no postings of disappearances of Catholic churches. He pulled on a jacket, grabbed a protein bar, and jumped into the Jeep. He sped out of the bank lot and headed up the street to where he knew there was a Catholic parish.

4

Father Frank Portacomaro was going through his usual Sunday morning pre-Mass routine. He was up early, said his morning prayers, reviewed his 8-minute homily, enjoyed a simple breakfast of toast, cheese, and a small cup of black coffee, then began to ready himself for the day. He would be saying three Masses today and receive a visit from another priest from another parish, Father Marty Clark, and enjoy a late lunch with Marty at Johnny’s Mexican Kitchen, a pristine Mexican cantina. As he walked into the chapel, a Jeep pulled into the parking lot, quite early, Father Frank thought. A fellow got out of the Jeep and stood, looking at the church building. Santa Maria Chapel was one of the older churches in Santa Fe and dated to the 1870s. It was typically ornate but had a distinct Gothic look to it and drew a

predictable early-Mass congregation. But this fellow didn't look like a Mass-attender.

Father Frank halted before entering the chapel and strolled over to the fellow in the Jeep. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Um," mumbled Cohen, "I wanted to see if your church was still here, Father."

"Excuse me?" said Frank.

"Let me introduce myself. I am Bob Cohen and I run a news website called Santa Fe Day."

"Yes Bob, I know your site. You have made quite the splash these past couple of years. Several of my parishioners have alerted me to breaking news that they saw first on your site."

"Thank you, Father. That is kind. But this morning, about forty-five minutes ago, a whole bunch of hits were happening on the site. Really quite strange. Each one reported about a church disappearing—all over town here in Santa Fe. Each report says the church was just gone. Big hole in the ground. No wires left. No nothing. Just a deep hole in the ground." He pulled his cell out of his shirt pocket. "Look here, three more since I left my computer!"

Frank looked at Bob's phone. "Oh my," he said.

"'Oh my?!' It's incredible Father! The thing is none of these churches, I think, are Catholic. I'm no church guy, but this is bizarre. And two synagogues are being reported on too. Father—what the hell, excuse me, heck, is going, the frick, ON?!"

Father Frank looked at Cohen, noted a keen sanity to him, or maybe a kind of pronounced sobriety, and said, "Bob, you said your name was? Come on in for a minute. This is odd."

Cohen thought, *Oh my? Odd? I have GOT to meet more clergy!* He stepped out of the Jeep into the parking lot, closed the door and followed the priest into the church narthex.



Father Frank had his own cell and quickly punched a call to a friend.

"Marty? Have you heard about anything unusual going on this morning? What? You looked at Santa Fe Day already? I've got the webmaster here right now. He says whatever has been happening to churches is NOT happening to Catholic churches. I'll see you at Johnny's as we planned. Bless you, brother."

As Cohen stood there, it occurred to him he had only ever been in a Catholic church one time, years ago in New York City. He had been invited to attend a memorial service for a friend's mother. He was uncomfortable then and he was even more creeped out now. If Catholic churches had been spared whatever crazy thing was going on out there, he was not sure he wanted to be in here now. Was this place going to start glowing? Frank looked at him and noticed that Cohen seemed unnerved.

"Bob, relax. We're not going to jump on you. There's no one here yet anyway except me. What do you think is going on? Is this some insane hoax? Is it an internet hacking of some kind?"

Cohen thought, *internet hacking? Ha! No one says that. This guy's safe enough, I guess.*

"I dunno Father, but my first impulse was to come by here and see if your church was still here. It is, I see, so whatever is happening has passed over you it seems. Maybe you guys will get hit tonight."

"Wow," the priest said, "I hope not. I had plans to go get drunk tonight," and then chuckled.

Cohen was starting to like this dude and said, "Father, this is completely random but would you like to join me as I go find out what the heck's going on?"

Frank seemed ambivalent then said, "Look Bob, yeah, I would, but I've got Mass in fifteen minutes. If you can stay through it—about forty minutes—I'll go with you and we can run over to Christian Assembly and see what's up there. Sit here in the narthex and then we'll go. I'll get coverage for the next Mass."

“Actually Father, yeah, I need to stop, slow down my head and catch my breath. Sure, I’ll wait. Why Christian Assembly? That’s not Catholic, is it?”

“No, it isn’t but the pastor is a friend of mine—Victor Moniz. If what you’re hearing really is somehow happening, he must be there, and I can only imagine waiting for his people to show up for worship. Why don’t you wait in my office.”

“Okay Father, I will. I’m sure you’ve got details to attend to. I’ll look like a hungry visitor then hide in your study.”

Frank smiled, “See you in a few.”

5

About nine o’clock that morning, Father Frank and Bob Cohen drove over to Siler Road where Santa Fe Christian Assembly was located. Or used to be located. About a dozen cars were haphazardly parked in the church parking lot. Perhaps twenty people were standing together, looking dazed and some were weeping. The priest and the webmaster got out of the car and slowly walked over to the crowd. Frank saw his friend Victor in the center, and his wife nearby talking to several women.

“Victor, my God,” Frank called out, Cohen in tow. He grabbed the pastor and hugged him. Cohen looked at the ground.

“Come look at this, Frank,” Victor said.

They walked to the edge of the hole. It could not have been more precisely cut out of the ground if a gaggle of civil and soil engineers had planned it. The hole’s walls were straight down appearing to be about forty feet, to a flat bottom of dirt, plumbing and conduits severed cleanly. No foundation footings were visible. The edges were crisp and looked deliberate. The parking lot was untouched. The footprint of the building itself was plainly evident, and the site looked like a cookie cutter carved it out.

Cohen thought, *it got beamed up*, and then was embarrassed.



“What happened, Victor?” said the priest.

“I don’t know, no clue. I showed up as usual about six o’clock this morning and this is what I found. Now some of our people are getting texts from friends in other churches that the same thing has happened to their churches.” He stopped, whirled around, and looked sharply at the priest. “Hey. Didn’t you find the same thing at your parish this morning?”

Cohen said, “Pastor Moniz, I’m Bob Cohen and I run Santa Fe Day, a website.”

“Yeah, I know it,” said Moniz. “I was getting notifications early about this thing at a bunch of churches and I drove over to Santa Maria Chapel because I live near it. There it sat, nothing unusual. It seems no Catholic churches were affected. The Father here was kind enough to agree to come with me to see if these reports were true. He said he knew you, so we came here first.”

Victor looked at them, still stunned. He had not felt this way ever in his life. Words were hard to come by, and he struggled to stay calm and composed. The people from his church who were there all felt the same. Asking what has happened? Why did it happen to us? What happens next? Victor and Rosaria were doing what they could to comfort the people, which wasn’t much.

“Look Victor,” said Frank. “Come over to the parish with us. Tell your people you’re going to get to the bottom of this and to pray. Do you think you know any other pastors that have seen the same thing this morning?”

“Yeah, my friend Steve who pastors New Beginnings Fellowship over on Old Pecos Trail showed up there early and found the same thing. None of us know what has happened.”

Cohen said, “Pastor, I was getting reports that this has happened all over the city. No reports of Catholic churches gone, but two synagogues are gone too. I’m going to go check out some other churches.”

“Okay Bob you do that. Let me get you back to your Jeep,” said Frank. “Victor, come over and call any other pastors that you know. I am willing to host a chat among us and let’s see what we can learn. How about at noon?”

Victor seemed sad and in shock and couldn't quit looking at the hole. With no other options and considering the need to be strong for his people and for Rosaria, he took the priest up on his offer.

6

Around noon, seven pastors and six wives drove into and parked in the small parking lot at Santa Maria Chapel. Pastors Victor and Rosaria Moniz, Stephen and Sophia Menendez, Jim and Barbara Zorowski, Randy and Megan Juarez, Bishop J. R. Jones and First Lady Cecelia Jones, Charles and Guinevere Ethan, and Bobby Whittier who was single. Father Portacomaro greeted them at the side door and invited them each in, introducing himself to those he did not know, which was most of them. Marty Clark had covered the Santa Maria 10:30 Mass so that Frank could ready a room and put on some coffee for the Protestant pastors. As they came in, the priest noted that each one looked stunned or troubled. There were no jocular high-fives or hugs. It occurred to him that there were no rabbis present and he knew that two synagogues had disappeared too. I guess no one thought to invite them.

In the six hours since Pastor Moniz's discovery of his own hole in the ground, the news had erupted across the city. So far it was known that eighteen Protestant churches had disappeared and two synagogues. No Catholic churches, no Mormon wards, Kingdom Halls or Orthodox churches, and neither of the two mosques had suffered any change. News trucks and lots of media people were hovering around each of the ecclesiastical holes. Police and fire apparatus also converged on each site, which was a challenge to the police and fire chiefs to dispatch enough officers and equipment.

Many pastors were still on their sites, except for the seven at Santa Maria. Bob Cohen had shuttled from site to site, using his phone as a guide. He was not up to speed on the names or locations of churches in general, a thing in which he had until today unconsciously prided himself.



The interpretations of what had happened, or rather what these happenings meant, were starting to surface. Randy Juarez of The King is Coming Community Church, said to Victor Moniz as they sat down, "This must mean something. Is Jesus coming soon?"

Bobby Whittier from Every Nation Baptist Church overheard that and offered, "No. It's got to be a big terrorist move. I know it! I was reading a website this week that predicted a massive and coordinated attack somewhere in the United States this week!"

As they began pouring their coffee and drinking their water, a late arrival walked in. She muttered, "Hello everyone, I'm Karen Asnat and I know I wasn't invited to this but a friend of mine who is a Christian called me and told me you were gathering. I attend Temple Beit Lehem and I am both Jewish and Christian. I hope I'm not intruding but I felt like I could come and be here with you since our building is gone too." Ms. Asnat was welcomed by a couple of women and invited to sit with them.

The priest stood up, uncomfortable in a room full of Protestant clergy, and nervously said, "I want to let you all know that while I have no idea what has happened, I feel for each of you. I felt the Lord tell me to make an invitation to you, as best I could, and see what we can do to figure out what is going on."

Victor, who was Frank's friend said, "Frank we all appreciate your reaching out to us. I think I am safe to say that we are all in shock and yet if nothing else we need some togetherness this afternoon.  Our fellowships are also in shock and Rosaria already overheard someone in our church saying that we deserve this, and we need to repent of something."  He lowered his head.

7

"So what now, Father? Is something cosmic about to happen?" spat out Bob Cohen, as he returned to Santa Maria. He snapped open a beer he had retrieved from his RV.

"I do not know what is happening," the priest curtly replied. He was getting tired, as do all people who live through stressful times like this. It mystified him chiefly

that his building still sat there as it had for over a hundred years, unmolested, as stately and gorgeous as ever. He glanced up at the statue of Mary. Said nothing. His church seemed to have quickly become a base camp for interested parties. Cohen sat there as other news people seemed to find their way to his door. His friend Father Marty was still there too, as entranced as Frank with this incredible day. But he had nothing to offer, really, either. Just his presence in the fray.

The pastors and wives sat together, prayed together, expressed their appreciation to Father Portacomaro and gradually drifted out of the parish. One detail that went undiscussed, strangely, was the subtle fragrance—that's the word—it wasn't a smell—that emanated from each church-hole in the city. It wasn't like walking into a Yankee Candle Shop. And it wasn't like the incense smell that his church sometimes used. Victor noticed the lack of mention of the fragrance, even though by now most of the pastors with whom he was in touch had mentioned it, or their wives. He thought it strange that none of them mentioned it, and he didn't either. Well, it was certainly not the biggest phenomena of the day. Eighteen churches were now known to have disappeared. And two synagogues. What next?

As the last of the guests departed, Frank said to Marty, "Want to have a glass of wine and relax for a few moments?"

Marty replied, "Sounds good."

Frank led him back to the kitchen area and pulled out a bottle of 2015 Raventos Blanc Conca del Riu Anoia de la Finca brut which had cost him thirty-two bucks and which he had saved for the odd moment of reflection. This afternoon certainly qualified. Each priest unbuttoned his collar, briefly sniffed his glass, and carefully took a swallow. The wine tasted chalky but lively and had an edgy fizz. They savored the quiet.

Marty looked at the ceiling and then at Frank. "Frank, what the hell is going on?"

Frank quietly chuffed and said, "I wish I knew. My heart broke for those folks and this is going to be the main thing in Santa Fe for I don't know how long. It also won't take long to become national news."



Marty looked past Frank and said, "And that webmaster fellow, Bob. Where did he come from?"

Frank thought and offered, "He just showed up this morning. Said he lives down the street and had seen lots of posts about churches disappearing and wanted to see if this one had evaporated. Well . . ." he looked around, "it hasn't."

The gravity of what had happened was quickly dawning on these two men and each felt that answers were secondary at the moment though their minds were interrogating them non-stop.

"Marty, let's jump in the car and drive over to The King is Coming. I don't really know Pastor Juarez, but I sort of randomly feel the need to run over there. Let's go see one of these holes."

The other priest looked at him for a second and thought to himself, *we're going to visit a Protestant church,* and then immediately threw that thought out. *We're going to visit a Protestant hole in the ground.* "Alright," he said, "you drive."

The priests put away the wine, washed out the glasses, locked up the church and drove off in Frank's nondescript Toyota. The drive took about fifteen minutes and they noticed lots of traffic for a Sunday afternoon.

The King is Coming Community Church was out on Alameda Avenue across from the KVSF radio station, really on the edge of town. As they neared, there were a few cars scattered about, one police cruiser, and one news truck. It was three o'clock.

## 8

The priests walked over to Randy Juarez who was standing, staring into his church hole. Like the others it was clean cut into the hard New Mexico ground—an unsettling detail because that made the disappearance seem all that much more deliberate, almost engineered. The cleanness also imposed an uncomfortable fascination for all the pastors and most others too. Why did this happen? How did it happen, and what's coming next? No one had any answers at all, now nine hours into the event.

Juarez looked around and saw the two priests. He grimly smiled and said, “Isn’t this the most bizarre thing you have ever seen, men?” He didn’t call them Fathers because all three sensed this moment was beyond such niceties.

“Yeah,” Frank said. “Pastor, I know it sounds trite, but I am sorry.”

“Why? You didn’t do it,” said the pastor.

Marty scuffed the ground. “Right, Pastor. I did not and if my church just disappeared, I would feel like you, I am sure. But Marty and I wanted to come over here. I don’t know why.”

“To gloat, Reverend?” Juarez let out.

“Yeah, probably not, Pastor,” said Marty. “I don’t know why we’re here—maybe people need to be with each other a little bit. Neither Frank nor I can sit in our castles and watch the Protestant world fall into a sink hole, can we?”

“I don’t know, couldn’t you?” Juarez said.

“No, we couldn’t,” Marty replied starting to feel some irritation. “Whatever we can do we want to do and we will do. I can’t speak for the whole diocese, but I can speak for me and Frank. None of us knows what happens next but I guess we want you to know—man I can’t believe I’m using these words—we’re in this with you. Somehow. I don’t even know why I said that.”

Frank looked at Marty. “Damn straight, Pastor,” came out of his mouth. Randy Juarez smiled. “Whoa Father, did you say ‘damn’”? They all laughed at once. “Damn straight I did,” came out of his mouth again.

The three walked around the hole. They said little, taking it in. The King is Coming Community Church was a small facility, but the gaping hole, with its depth made the space seem bigger.

And then, Frank stopped. “What’s that smell?”



Juarez said, “Yes, I smell it, too. Not typical for this neighborhood at all.”

Marty said, “Reminds me of honey.”

Juarez sniffed hard again. “Huh. Yeah, it does. I didn’t even think honey HAD a smell.”

Then, for no rational reason, Frank said quietly, “What’s that spell, what’s that spell, what’s that smell?” and started laughing. Marty joined him. Juarez did not. Then, Frank couldn’t stop laughing. It was a memory of Country Joe and the Fish, a rock and roll group from the sixties, and the quote was from the famous “Fish Cheer” from Woodstock. It could not have been more inappropriate at a moment like this, but nevertheless the words had come out of his mouth. And he couldn’t stop laughing. Marty laughed for a moment too and then looked at his colleague. Frank now started crying. Pastor Juarez stepped back and looked at the two priests. Father Portacomaro was weeping heavily. Laughter had morphed into grief, and Father Clark held him up. Pastor Juarez thought he was now in the Twilight Zone.

Then, the priest got control of himself and said, “I’m sorry. This is such a crazy day. I feel for you Randy and although I don’t know you, I feel for your flock too. I dunno. It’s starting to get to me.”

## 9

Bob Cohen had visited six of the holes around the city. Around three thirty he drove back to his RV and crashed. He flopped down on his couch/bed and looked up at the ceiling. He had consumed three beers—not enough to plaster him but enough to zone him out enough to slow his mind down. *Okay Robert,* he thought, *what do you want to do with this thing?*

He heard a vehicle outside and looked out the window. There was a CNN van outside and someone was getting out. The woman knocked at the metal door and Cohen opened it.

“Are you Robert Cohen?” she asked.

“Yes, I am, and you are?”

“Mindy McConnell,” the young woman replied.

“Where have I heard that name before?” Cohen asked.

McConnell rolled her eyes. “*Mork and Mindy*. TV Show, Robin Williams. My dad was named Sam McConnell and my mom thought it would be fun to name me Mindy.” She twisted a lock of hair and tilted her head to the side and grinned. Clearly, she had this move down.

Cohen laughed. “Cool. What can I do for you?”

McConnell replied, “You know what’s been going on here in Santa Fe today and my producer sent me to find you and see what you can tell us. Can I get maybe ten minutes with you?”

“Sure,” Cohen said, “come on in.”

Mindy stepped up into the RV. She had a G44 behind her back in a holster, and she sat down in his desk chair.

“What do you think is going on? We know of sixteen churches that have gone AWOL.”

“Eighteen, I think, or that anyone has noticed anyway. And two synagogues.”

“Geez,” she said. “We didn’t have the synagogues. Which two?”

“There are only two in Santa Fe,” he said. “And they’re both gone just like the churches in every way. Even with the smell. I went by both today. The eighteen churches are all Protestant and, what would you call them? Conservative? I dunno. I’ve never been a watcher of the church scene.”

“The smell? What are you talking about?” McConnell asked.

“At each place there is a strange smell,” Cohen gave her. “Not a bad smell and not strong, but the people at the churches all noticed it. I didn’t find it real noticeable



but everyone that is part of these churches seems sure they’ve never smelled it before. Kind of like honey,” he said.

“Honey? Honey doesn’t smell, does it?” she said.

“Whodda thunk? Apparently, it does,” he replied. “Look, here on my computer—these posts. This is how I got on to this about six o’clock this morning. People all over the city were reporting into my site and a couple say, ‘a strange smell seems to be coming out of the hole’ or something to that effect.”

“Weird,” she said.

“Yes, that is definitely the word of the day,” Cohen replied. “And there’s more. If you go to any of these churches—um, church holes—you’ll notice how clean a hole it is. No ragged edges, no smoke, not even detached wires or pipes. It’s like whoever did this had days to demolish the place, remove all debris and turn it into a national park display. Very, very weird. And it all happened overnight. I don’t even think CNN could engineer such a clever project.”

“Yeah, most def not,” she agreed but didn’t miss the slight sarcasm.

“Mr. Cohen. Any clue as to what’s happened? Or have you talked to anyone who thinks they know what’s happened?”

“Nadda. Zip. Nothing. No clue. Which makes this pretty much the strangest story I have ever been part of. It doesn’t matter what happens, there’s always someone who thinks they know what happened. If this was one church, we would all say, ‘Sink hole with Russian influence’ and go have a beer and be done with it. Def page six material. Want a beer by the way?” Bob grabbed one out of the plastic six-pack ring and offered it to her.

“No thanks,” she said. “I’m working.”

“So am I,” he gave back. “Doesn’t mean you can’t wet your pipes.”

Mindy raised an eyebrow. “The same thing has happened to all, what, you say eighteen churches?”

"And two synagogues," he added.

"And two synagogues," she corrected herself. She leaned back in the chair. She had only been with Cohen for three minutes and already she felt overwhelmed. And excited too. He was right. Gotta be the biggest and oddest and most interesting story of the year. Decade maybe.

"Was anyone inside any of the places when they disappeared?" she inquired.

Cohen stood straight up. "Whoa. No one has thought of that question yet." He walked across the little room and turned around. "I have not heard of anyone being reported missing, but that is an awesome question, Mindy McConnell. We've all been focusing, for what? Going on ten hours now, on the buildings and the weird cleanness of what is left behind. No one has thought to take it further yet and look at the people. Gimme a second."

Cohen pulled out his cell from his pocket and hit redial.

"Father, Cohen here. Good, I'm okay. Just getting tired. Look, have any *people* been reported missing? You didn't think of that either. Right. I've got a CNN reporter who asked me. No one? Okay, thanks. Later."

"You called your dad?" McConnell asked.

"Ha. Funny," Cohen said. "No, that was Father Portacomaro at Santa Maria Chapel. He's kinda in this too, although no Catholic churches have disappeared, which is another very crazy thing. I met him this morning and we went to the Santa Fe Christian Assembly. He said he knew that pastor although he's not Catholic. Then a bunch of pastors and wives gathered at his church to kind of kibbutz or something. He was nice to them. Had a buddy, another priest with him. What was his name? Father something or other. Anyway Frank, Father Portacomaro, is reaching out to some of them, I guess."

McConnell said, "Mr. Cohen I think we're not going to post the full story on this tonight, are we?"



"I doubt it," he said. Then he added, "Look, Ms. McConnell, you and I are kind of competitors, right? And I basically can't stand your types to begin with."

"My types? What? Women reporters?"

"Ha," he shot back. "Nice try. No. Big fancy network types."

"Oh yeah, I guess I kinda look like that," Mindy realized.

Cohen went on, "But I'm gonna go out on a limb here. We can attack this separately for whatever profit that is, or we can do a little collaboration. What do you think?"

She thought and said, "I'm game. I almost think this is bigger than Competitive News Sources. Did you ever see the movie *Battle Los Angeles* when the aliens attack Santa Monica and Los Angeles? Aaron Eckhart?"

"Yeah, great movie," Cohen replied. "I think you're right, and if we stumble on a rational explanation then we can divide up the carcasses and go our separate ways."

"Exactly. Gross."

He said, "Let me change my shirt and we can go back over to that Christian Assembly Hole."

"Fine," McConnell said, "I'll take that beer now."

## 10

It was now four o'clock. For Cohen, the day had been long, surreal, and absolutely engrossing. He had no idea what was going on, found himself in a very tentative collaboration with a CNN reporter, was feeling a warm kindship—very strangely—with a Catholic priest, and was completely exhausted. He locked the RV and watched Mindy get into his Jeep. For the first time he noticed she was pretty in a kind of horsey way. Attractive enough but not newscast beautiful. She had shoulder length brown hair and cute eyes. He decided not to mention that to her. After seeing the G44 and he decided to "run silent, run deep."

He looked up at the late afternoon sky, half wishing to see a giant alien spaceship hovering like in *Independence Day* which, while probably heralding the end of the world as we know it, would at least provide an explanation for the Santa Fe phenomena. He wondered if this had happened anywhere else in the nation, or world? He had glanced at a couple of news sites and only saw the beginnings of the story about Santa Fe. Nowhere else was being mentioned yet. The air was dry, a slight breeze coming off the Santa Fe hills to the east. He wondered, *where is this taking me?*

He climbed into the Jeep, started it up and headed out of the bank property parking lot. Mindy looked over at him and said, "You look tired—clean shirt notwithstanding."

"Yeah. I am. This is the weirdest thing I've ever been around," Cohen replied. "And my brain can't crank out even the beginnings of a theory. Eighteen Not-Catholic churches, gone. Just gone."

"And two synagogues," she added.

"Yeah, and them," he said. "Twenty buildings that we know about, surgically removed. And that smell people keep mentioning. Ya know, Ms. McConnell, that must be a clue to this. I don't have any idea what that means unless all these churches had beehives and were raising massive secret funds by cornering the honey market," Cohen rambled.

"Um. What drugs are you on, exactly?" she asked.

Cohen chuckled and thought*, we've arrived at stupid now*. "I dunno Mizz CNN, you got any ideas?" he quipped.

Mindy sat silently as they rode the short distance over to the church site. Then, as they pulled into the church parking lot she said, "I read this strange novel once called *This Present Darkness,* and it was about the spirit world and angels and demons and stuff."

"Uh huh," Cohen said. "Let's see what the Good Father has come up with."



11

Cohen and McConnell pulled into the Santa Fe Christian Assembly parking lot at 4:20 p.m. The sun was still shining and the air was still. Again, no noise could be heard. They slowly walked to the edge of the hole and looked in. No changes. There didn't seem to be any place else to go. The other churches were reportedly all the same; the ones Cohen had surveyed were, anyway.

Mindy's phone signaled at that moment—her supervisor. CNN wanted some answers. She ignored it.

Cohen said, "So let's be clear on what we know."

"Shoot," she said.

"First," he started, "we know eighteen church buildings and two synagogue buildings are gone. Second, their parking lots are unscathed. Third, no Catholic or other religious buildings are gone."

McConnell added, "Four, we know of no people that were scooped up with these buildings."

"I like how you said that, Mindy—we don't actually know that none are missing, but we *know of* none that are missing—none have been reported gone so far," Cohen said.

"Right. Just the facts, sir." McConnell smirked at him.

"Fifth," she went on, "the air at each site is not completely odorless but there is a subtle and sweet fragrance at each."

He said, "That seems right."

“Sixth,” he added, “no one, so far as we know, including or especially the clergy, have any idea or even theories as to what has happened, to this point, four thirty.”

“Seventh,” he continued, “the people of the congregations we have met so far are all traumatized.”

“Well duh,” the CNN reporter spat out. “Who wouldn’t be?”

Cohen looked hard at McConnell. One minute he started to kind of like her and then another he was thinking, *witch.*

In that moment they heard a helicopter nearing them and noticeably loud. They looked up and an olive drab, Air National Guard HH60G helicopter slowed, cruised overhead. Two airmen were in the door, watching. The two journalists watched it and absent-mindedly waved. The helicopter circled and then looked like it was going to land in the parking lot. They moved back to the Jeep.

12

The Pave Low settled down on the asphalt and its rotors slowed, the engine shut down. One airman and an officer stepped out, instinctively ducking their heads. They looked around briefly and then walked over to Cohen and McConnell. The officer said, “I’m Captain Rogers, New Mexico Air Guard. This is Staff Sergeant Nakamura. And you two are?” Cohen noticed their names on their flight suits.



Cohen offered, “Captain, I am Bob Cohen and this is Mindy McConnell. We’re news people, and I am guessing you’ve heard about this hole?”

They all shook hands, and Nakamura said to McConnell, “Nanu nanu.” He was, after all, National Guard, not regular Air Force. Rogers shot Nakamura a quick disapproving glance.

She rolled her eyes and said, “Funny.” Cohen chuckled ever so briefly thinking that not many people today would get that reference, but hey, maybe it’s Mork from Ork who did this, or Romulans, or the Kardasians. The great Orkan/Romulan/ Kardasian Church Snatch - acronym ORK. Then he almost said aloud to himself, *shut up, Cohen, you idiot, this is serious.”*

The rotors on the Pave Low were still now, and the four stood there, looking at each other. A pilot remained in the helicopter.

Cohen asked, “So did the governor send you all airborne?”

“Right,” Rogers replied. “Ruined a perfectly lovely Sunday. So can you two tell us anything?”

McConnell offered a quick review of the facts. She looked at the two official-looking guardsmen and wished she had more to give them. But that’s where it was at. A few facts and no answers. Rogers and Nakamura walked over to the edge of the hole and peered in.

Rogers looked around again, and said, “So twenty churches gone?”

Cohen said, “Eighteen actually, and two synagogues.”

“Oh? We had not heard that detail yet,” Rogers offered. “Any places outside the city? As we flew in from Albuquerque we went around the city once and we didn’t notice any crowds or gatherings in the outlying neighborhoods.”

McConnell said, “So far as we know all the holes are within Santa Fe itself.” She thought more and said, “Hey, that’s another detail we’ve not thought about. Captain, this all happened overnight, last night, and Mr. Cohen and I and maybe

other news people we don't know about yet, have been talking to pastors and church people to see if anyone has a clue how or why this happened. Everybody, so far, is completely stunned and in the dark."

At that point, a New Mexico State Police Dodge RAM pickup pulled into the lot. A state officer got out and approached them, looking grave. Introductions were given all around. Cohen thought this seemed weird, as apparently no one was really in charge. The statie's name badge said, "Duvall." So now five of them stood in the Christian Assembly parking lot as the sun began to move behind the hills to the west.

Karen Asnat had been part of the Temple Beit Lehem community for a couple of years. She was single, worked in her job as a publishing editor, which she thought was a rather boring career, but she had to admit to herself that she loved her work, her congregation, and living in Santa Fe. Now, her synagogue's building had disappeared. By six o'clock that Sunday evening she was also still stunned by the simple, bizarre reality.

The other thing about Karen was that three years ago she had started thinking about Jesus. She didn't tell anyone. She certainly didn't tell her parents or anyone, including her friends, in the synagogue. She wasn't sure at all *why* she had started thinking about Jesus. She really knew nothing about the legend, the myth, the story, the Christian tale. She had dated a fellow once who it turned out was in fact, a believer in Jesus. He had been slow to inform her of this, but after a few dates he came clean. He knew Karen was Jewish, but he was nice to her and respectful and



seemed to like her a lot. Then, wham! He got transferred to the east coast and that was that. But that had got her wondering about this supposed Jesus of Nazareth. She ordered a New Testament from Amazon, a simple one—and started reading it. Matthew, Mark, and so forth. Her first impression was that *someone needs to edit this.* That made her laugh to herself. She understood that what she was reading was really old; how old, she didn't know.

Then one night she was reading in the Gospel of John. She was reading this story about a woman from Samaria and how Jesus talked to her, and what in the world was Jesus even *doing* in Samaria, because she knew enough Jewish history to know that in those times Samaria was estranged from the rest of Judea? But she was intrigued by the story. She loved how the writer, John, wrote that the Jesus' other friends were like, *Um, let's get outta here, Jesus,* and thought that was funny. But a picture of Jesus had started to form in her mind. It had started to form even deeper than in her mind—in her heart. She remembered about a year ago, she sat upright in bed one night. "Oh my God," she said out loud to herself. "Do I actually *believe* in Jesus? This will get me in a lot of trouble." So she tried to talk herself out of it. She threw the little New Testament away in a garbage can at a 7-Eleven so no one would find it.

Two days later she ordered another copy. She read the Book of Acts. She thought that those people were as uncertain and goofy as she was, but they just kept on. Even when they get in a shitload of trouble. At synagogue, Karen acted normal and over this past year was finding some of the routine and protocols more meaningful than before. She kept saying to herself, this is nuts. If anyone here knew what I'm feeling they would be very disappointed, some would accuse me of betrayal or selling out to the American Christian Machine. She felt incredibly guilty that she was even thinking about Jesus as anything other than an impostor. She had been taught at university that the Jesus tradition had been invented by his apostles, whatever they were, and that the guy himself was probably fine, if a bit full of himself. As to him rising from the dead, doing miracles and all the other strange things these Gospels recorded, Karen was taught, they're not to be taken literally. These writings, after all, are not history—they're not Josephus or Philo. They're politically tainted propaganda, ancient enough, but not to be considered as sources for *emeth*, truth.

She had walked into that impromptu and electric gathering at the Santa Maria Catholic church, feeling drawn there. Her own congregation's building had up and disappeared too. She had received a text message from her friend, Manya, that this had occurred sometime after Sabbath was over, and that another congregation saw the same thing happen. Then Manya texted her again and said she had heard some Christian churches had also disappeared and there was a gathering at Santa Maria Chapel. She impulsively drove over there and entered the building, a thing which normally would have made her nervous. When Karen said, "I attend Temple Beit Lehem, and I am both Jewish and Christian," it didn't seem to cause a ripple or wave at all, and she was invited to have a seat and a woman whose name she couldn't remember hugged her and handed her a bottle of water. She hadn't been there long, sitting, listening when it became clear that if anyone was out of place, it wasn't her—it was all these Protestant pastors and their wives sitting in a Catholic church together. *Someone needs to edit THIS thing,* she thought to herself.

But there was a strange camaraderie there. It seemed like what she had heard about *Kristallnacht*—the "night of broken glass"—long, long ago in Germany when the Nazis really started hitting hard on the Jews. Her grandmother had been there.

She thought these people have all, we have all, lost something important. It is so off the wall. Where have our buildings gone? And as they all left the Chapel there were no answers, just a sense of endurance and resignation. She overheard one pastor's wife say, "God will show us when He chooses to. His name be praised," which, in fact, sounded very Jewish to her.

By telling them that she was both Jewish and Christian, she had actually outed herself *to* herself. Yes, she now believed in Jesus and had no idea what that might mean. But she couldn't deny how she felt. And she was drawn back to read that New Testament often. What will this all mean to everybody, to us here in Santa Fe facing the craziest thing we've ever seen?

## 14

Early on Monday morning, after a restless night of sleep, Steve Menendez crawled out of his bed, leaving Sophia still asleep. He looked at her, the bed, the ceiling and then out the window. All seemed as it usually was. Nothing was glowing. Nothing



had changed color. Their yard looked its normal green-brown as it did this time of year. *Was yesterday a dream?* he asked himself.

He went to the kitchen, still expecting to see some huge change of paradigm evident. No, the kitchen looked normal. He threw a breakfast burrito into the microwave, and Sophie came in. She asked, "Do you want to have some eggs, honey?"

"No babe, I think a burrito will be fine," he answered.

She sat at the kitchen bar and asked her husband, "What happens today?"

"I dunno," he snuffed. "Normally this is my day off. But I can't sit around and act like nothing happened yesterday."

She sat next to him in silence. Then she said, "Let's pray about this."

"Yeah," he said. She held his hands in hers.

"Lord Jesus, we praise you today the best that we can. You know what has happened and why it has happened and we know and believe that you are in control. We don't know what to do. And as never before we need you to show up and reveal what we do now."

Steve added, "Yes Lord, we are blown away by this. We need you. Guide us today, please, in Jesus' name, amen."

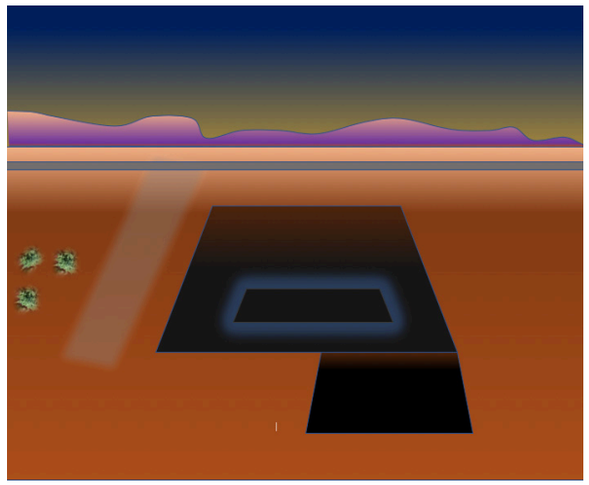
The little prayer didn't magically right their spirits but they each were spiritually mature enough to know that this was their direction. Pray. One small step. Give it to the Lord.

Then Sophia said, "This feels like a story, like a Frank Peretti novel, remember him?"

"Wow Sophie, you pulled that out of the deep past. Sure, I remember Peretti, *This Present Darkness* back in the '80s. I read it as a young kid," Steve said. "I remember our pastor didn't like those books—said they were 'inappropriately speculative.' Funny that I remember his words."

Sophia answered, “Rosaria told me that she thought of him because these holes in the ground are so clean and so weird and it made her think there’s some spiritual answer to all this.”

“I don’t know. It is so completely hard to get our heads around,” he said. Then he ate his burrito.



15

New Mexico State Police Trooper Avon Duvall visited every known church site where the buildings had disappeared. It was now Monday morning and technically he was not working but there was no stopping this saga of investigation. He drove back to Santa Maria which somehow had seemed to become the main place where official people were focusing, maybe because Father Portacomaro was being particularly accommodating to them all, including some of the Protestant pastors.

He parked his beloved State RAM truck and walked to the door of the office section, knocked, and was greeted by the priest.

“Good morning, trooper, come in please,” said Father Frank.



“Good morning, Father,” replied Duvall. “It has been a long night and I felt like this was the place to begin Day Two. Have you seen anyone else yet?”

Once inside, he could see Father Marty Clark was there and saw that the two were having coffee.

“Would you like a cup of coffee,” asked Frank?

“Yeah sure, that would be nice,” was the reply.

Portacomaro chatted on, “Father Marty and I were musing about the state and national response to this thing. We are all still in shock I think perhaps because there seems to be no answers yet. We are wondering what resources the state or the feds might have to help us figure this out?”

Duvall said, “I’m sure you both know by now that during the night this became national news. That reporter from CNN is the first news snoop and you can expect more to arrive very soon, I am sure.”

Clark looked at the trooper, looked at the other priest and then offered, “You know, officer, if it was just one church, or a regular commercial building, or a house even, we would all be interested and then write it off as some unexplained thing which will give up an explanation soon enough—sink hole, Los Metros, Knights Templar, the Borg, something. But the absolute psychedelic trip that this is, is because it is more than one place, and then we start meditating on the lack of churches like ours, it seems to have happened all at once, overnight, and the holes are so straight. Frank and I certainly want our fellow churchmen and the state to know that whatever we can do, we will.”

“Everyone appreciates that, Father, I know,” Duvall said.

Frank took up the chat, “The National Guardsmen told us we could expect more attention today from the military, too. There is concern that these disappearances are the beginning of something bigger, and the officer—what was his name? —um, Captain Rogers, I think, said not to get too alarmed if more choppers start buzzing around.”

Marty then stood up and said, “Gentlemen, why don’t we offer another meeting here or at my parish tonight? I know we did this yesterday but now that we know the full range of churches . . .”

“And synagogues . . .” Frank added.

“Right, the full twenty places,” Marty went on, “we can hold a more focused and purposeful meeting for an hour or so. I am completely mystified as to why my parish was spared. That is so damned interesting!”

Duvall said, “If you want, I can communicate with the church people, or at least as many of the pastors as I can find. So, what time?”

Frank thought about it, immediately thought it was a good gesture and at least it was doing something. “How about six thirty tonight,” he asked?

“Sounds good,” Marty said. “Should we call the bishop too?”

Frank said, “Let’s wait. It’s been one day. We need to be able to say something that we know when we talk to the good Bishop and we don’t know much yet.”

Duvall offered, “Doesn’t chain of command kick in here?”

Both Frank and Marty laughed. “Sure, Officer Duvall, but we don’t need any commands until we have our feet on the ground, as it were,” Frank said.

“Amen,” added Marty.

Duvall moved towards the door and said, “Gentlemen, I will work with getting a six thirty notice to all eighteen congregations. I should add a couple from each place, right? So we don’t get four hundred people coming for coffee.”

Marty said, “Right, good point. Tell them we need one or two from each place for a conversation. And don’t shoot down any choppers!”

Duvall answered, “I’ll keep them out of my crosshairs,” and got into his truck and sped off.





Just after six o’clock that evening, Duvall pulled through the Taco Bueno, ordered two burritos and a Dr. Pepper, ate them in the parking lot, and then headed back to Santa Maria. He was amazed that he had achieved some kind of contact with people from all twenty congregations. Each congregation indicated that it would send one or two representatives to the meeting. For himself he somehow felt like a pawn in a bigger chess match. He knew the state government was moving nearby due to the three Pave Lows that had been circling the area all day. He saw on CNN that the federal government was on the alert, and he surmised that the Catholic Church was starting to pay attention. He had met more people in one day from all these religious communities than he had ever met in any one single day before. He was quite exhausted.

Randy Juarez, the pastor from The King is Coming Community Church, seemed the most unsettled by the whole thing. He had lost a building that was known for its modernity and progressive atmosphere. He was also known for lots of apocalyptic advertising around the city. He said his church comprised about five hundred people. When Duvall called him to let him know that another meeting was set for that evening, Juarez answered, “Excellent. I can give them a word I received this morning.”

Duvall said. “It’s set for six-thirty and just one or two people please. Santa Maria is fairly small.”

Finding someone to notify from the two synagogues was more difficult. Father Portacomaro put him in touch with Bob Cohen, of Santa Fe Day—who told him of a woman named Karen Asnat, from Temple Beit Lehem. Once he talked to her about the meeting, she gave him the name of Cantor Rafael Donner of Shalom Congregation and his phone number. When Duvall spoke with Donner the man acknowledged that, “Yes, our building is gone,” and seemed almost happy to report that fact.

Everyone was somehow expecting answers. His supervisor had radioed him three times during the day and asked him for news. Duvall, like everyone else, had no explanations, no clues yet as to why the event had occurred. The three helicopters

had set down in a field near a school and their occupants were met by two white, official looking Chevrolet Suburbans and motored off someplace.

The state trooper pulled into the Santa Maria parking lot, finding about fifteen vehicles there already. He napkinned the hot sauce from his lips and fingers, then went into the small church. The attendees were all gathered in the sanctuary and the priest was chatting in a friendly way with a small group who looked like pastors. He saw the other priest, Marty, talking to an Air Force captain in the aisle and then Father Portacomaro called the meeting together. He started with, “I want to say ‘welcome’ to you all tonight, in what has been the strangest week for many people—that anyone can remember. I want also to say that Father Clark and I want to tell you we are very sorry for what you are all facing. We have no idea why ours and other church buildings are still intact, and we feel a great sympathy for you each for what has happened. Father Clark and I felt a strong sense to try to assist you all in figuring this out.”

Pastor Moniz offered, “Thank you to both of you pastors. We have come with little sense of agenda other than the obvious questions, ‘What has happened, why, and what do we do now.” His wife, Rosaria, sat next to him and held his hand.

Pastor Stephen Menendez spoke next. “Folks I am sure we all see this as a great challenge to our belief that the Lord is in control, and I wish to say that somehow, those of us who have lost our church buildings, are all in this together. I would like to propose that this coming Sunday we meet someplace together, easy, and have a worship service jointly. Just one Sunday, and maybe we find a place maybe outside that can hold us.”

Most of the people nodded or grunted in the affirmative. Father Clark nodded too but Father Portacomaro was motionless. Father Clark added, “As far as I am concerned you can meet in the field next to my parish. There is plenty of parking and as long as it doesn’t rain you are free to assemble there. I have not lost my building—yet anyway—and I think that is one thing I can do for you.”

Father Portacomaro then said, “We will need to consult with our bishop first.”

A dark expression passed over Clark’s face. Duvall looked at him and snorted. “Yeah,” he said to Karen sitting next to him, “You wouldn’t want the bishop



offended.” Bob Cohen and Mindy McConnell were there too and buzzed quietly among themselves.

Clark said, “I am sure anyone would be fine with any gesture of kindness. You folks are welcome to come to our property this Sunday if you want to.”

Pastor Stephen then added, “Brothers and sisters, we must feel our way through this one day at a time. As we pray—and maybe we can do some of *that* together too."

“So long as the good bishop approves,” interrupted Cohen.

Stephen went on, “We wait on the Lord. He is among us regardless of what building we are in or *not* in. Our faith is not dependent on buildings. I remember hearing in seminary that there was a church in England in the 1600s that had to meet in a large hole in the ground, so that the authorities would not see them.”

“We’ve certainly got plenty of holes in the ground, don’t we”? said Victor Moniz, and the whole group burst into a much-needed laugh.

Then Randy Juarez stood up and announced, “I think the Lord has revealed to me what He is doing.” Now the serious and awkward mood returned.

## 17

It is hard to describe the reaction except to say that everyone became quiet. They looked at each other, at the floor, at the ceiling and at Juarez. They all wanted answers. Twenty religious communities, eighteen conservative Protestant—according to the general perception, though there were no official affiliations or obligatory ties—and two synagogues. Karen Asnat and Cantor Donner sat together on one side of the chapel. They looked at Juarez and felt an as-yet-undefined kinship with everyone there though almost no one knew each other. Cohen was there too. And McConnell and Duvall and Captain Rogers. Fathers Portacomaro and Clark sat to the side, up front.

Juarez began. “Folks, I had said I had a ‘word’ from the Lord on this. I saw a few eyes roll when I said that, and I can’t blame you. I know that my Church, The King is Coming Community Church, is not known for being very traditional. We kind of pride ourselves, I have to admit, in being outside the box on a lot of things. Now like you all, we have no ‘box’ anymore. I also must admit to you that I really loved our building. It was one of the largest churches in Santa Fe, it was new, it was cool. Every one of our people loved going there. Now it’s gone. And like all of you I have no idea what that means or what we shall do. But the ‘word’ that presses on my heart and mind is this: our buildings are not who we are. This is something embedded in our Bibles and you all know that. The early church had no buildings at all and didn’t for at least two hundred years. They existed, they grew, they suffered together and they became a movement that could not be extinguished. I don’t mean to sound trite or preachy. But as I look at you all, who I do not know, I feel something powerful between us here this evening. What are we called to be and to do? I don’t know why other churches didn’t disappear. But here we are, and we are grateful to these two priests and their kindness these past two days. I do not feel threatened to have you news people or the State police or the Air Force here today. We know we are being looked at by the whole country. I am real clear in my mind that tonight, tomorrow, this week we have something in front of us that has not happened before, or at least not in hundreds of years.”

Victor Moniz put his hand up and Juarez stepped back. “My brothers and sisters, my name is Victor Moniz and I am pastor of Santa Fe Christian Assembly. I think Pastor Juarez has spoken well so far. We are all without buildings. We do not know why yet and I don’t know if we will ever be able to figure out why. A few of us have been praying and fasting, to be near to the Lord. Pastor Juarez said something we all know to be true. We are not defined by buildings or property lines or cool sound systems or fog machines.” He glanced at Juarez who winced a little.

“We are defined by our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Tonight, we are not about reminding ourselves of our differences. We have been slammed by one huge commonality—we are twenty communities without a roof. Or chairs. Or pianos. I have not heard of any member of our churches who has disappeared along with the buildings. Are any of you aware of any of your fellow church members who have vanished?”



The people looked at each other and randomly nodded, “No.” Some mumbled, “I haven’t even thought about that.”

Juarez then stepped back up, “Yes Victor, you are right. So what are we to do? We can start committees—oh, we’re good at that—and seek to get answers. The State police and the military are on duty and I am sure will do everything they can to investigate this thing. But we need to pray and do everything we can to help each other find space to gather, minister and continue doing what we are really called to do. Santa Fe is 83,000 people, not a very big city. There are lots of halls and auditoriums all over the place. Somehow, we need to help each other. That’s the word I have from God in my heart. That simple.”

Cohen leaned to McConnell and whispered, “Disappointing. I could have gotten that ‘word’ from the Woodstock transcripts.”

She snipped at him, “shut up.”

There was no agenda for this meeting. No one was really in charge. No one was cashing in on his or her position or authority. There was a randomness and equality about the gathering. And it was flowing. Steve Menendez then came up and said, “Brethren, can I say something?”

“Some of our places can meet in our parking lots but the weather might not cooperate. We need to be under roof if possible. Maybe for this next Sunday we can pair up and meet together if we can find space.”

Father Frank then said, “If any of you can fit in our sanctuary you are welcome to meet here in the afternoon. I don’t know how long your services run but maybe a couple of churches could stagger two services here and another in the evening. We can schedule our parishioners to all attend mass in the morning.”

Marty said, “What he said can go for my parish too. We would be happy to help.”

Then Juarez said, “Everybody, we don’t know how to do this but I think it is kind of cool that these fellows are willing to help us.”

Then Captain Rogers stood up and walked to the front of the assembly. “Citizens, the National Guard will assist with transportation if you need it. We want to help with this if we can, and while none of us knows why or how your buildings have all disappeared, the immediate need seems to be to help you stay together. I will put a clipboard over on the table. If you wish us to arrange some busses for you, give us your contact information and we will be in touch in the next day or two.”

Moniz said, “We appreciate the help, Captain. I’m sure some of us would like your help.”

Again, Cohen mumbled to McConnell, “Big Brother is watching.” She moved away from him and sniffed.

18

*Screegion crouched in the ceiling—if the people could see the demon, it would have looked upside down, but the spirit world has no physical orientation. No human could see the demon and it made virtually no discernible gesture at them or to them, by sound or sight or smell. It chuckled to itself, “Foolish bastards. They go on with such a cutesy lah-dee-dah sentiment. I spit on their idiocy. May their words become a festering pox to them all. Huh hekh hekh.”*

*Four other demons hung there too, like bats, only far uglier. They started humming a low, orc-like chant. Screegion joined them. If any humans could have heard it, they would think it sounded like a growler-version of “In-a-Gadda-Da-Vida.”*

The only vague and barely sensed awareness by the people present was picked up by McConnell who sniffed, looked at Cohen, as if he had passed gas and moved even farther down the bench.

Moniz then brought up the matter of the site-based aroma, seeming like honey, at his site and asked if the other church people had detected it too. Most of them nodded or said “Yes, we did.”

*Screegion and its compadres stopped their chant. Another demon drummed, “Oh Gawd, that thing. I hate that foul stench. Why that showed up I cannot fathom.*



*Makes me want to puke my guts out.” Then Screegion said, “As if you had any guts, stink-skin!” It then sarcastically recited:*

*Heaven’s ether spews its fumes,*
*Same old story, foom hoom doom*

*Yet another demon belched something that was like a curse, but in some black speech unknown to any humans. These demons were not senior-level evils or even of some intermediate caste; they were lowerlings assigned to watch. In fact, these black spirit world gutter-level wretches didn’t know either what was going on with the Santa Fe holes. But they were intrigued. These five were dispatched by their sergeant who in turn was dispatched by its captain.*

Moniz went on. “When I went back to our site the first time, the aroma was gone, then it returned. It was not strong, and I must admit I really liked it. It wasn’t strong or heavy. It was very faint but there, then gone, then there again. I liked it so much I stupidly thought to myself, I wonder if the Yankee Candle Shop at the mall has this scent.”

Rosaria laughed and said, “Have you ever been in that shop, honey?” He laughed too and said, “Um, no, but it’s your favorite shop.”

They all laughed. They needed to laugh, and Sophia Menendez squeezed Rosaria’s hand— “Good one, Ro. We all need to laugh.”

*A demon, pissy-like, shrieked at its teammates, mimicking the pastor’s wife, “Good one Ro we all need to laugh.” Then they all started repeating, “Good one Ro, Good one Ro, Good one Ro . . . Why don’t cha blow? Good one Ro!”*

*Screegion mumbled, “Laugh on fools, for all the good it will do you. Your churchy cliques are done for now. No buildings! No buildings! Ruin! Ruin! Ruin!” And all five demons cranked up their din, like some evil chorus. To them it was loud. The humans heard nothing.*

The two priests looked at each other. They were not unfamiliar with Mass aromas. They used incense routinely and when they had gone by a few of the holes they had smelled nothing.

At that point Cantor Donner stood up and added, “Folks, the aroma, as you say, where our synagogue was, smelled to me like lilac.”

And Karen then said, “Yes, Cantor, the same at Temple Beit Lehem.”

Moniz then said, “Wow. Really? Man, as if we needed more mystery. I love lilac, actually.”

At that point Bob Cohen stood up. “What are you people going to do?”

Moniz brought himself back around. “Yes, Bob, you’re right. How about we pair up fellowships, set schedules for meeting this Sunday, and a few can take the Fathers up on their offers. Does that seem reasonable?”

Bishop Jones answered, “Let’s do it. We gotta do something for our people.”

Moniz said, “If you’re friends with someone from another church, pair up and set a schedule. If you need transportation help, the captain can help. Bob, if you and Ms. McConnell are interested in doing more than just reporting, we could use some help. I don’t think any of us want to become rock stars over this, so don’t zoom in on us and exploit us for news fodder, please. But if you want to go through this with us, we could use any help.” Steve thought, *maybe we can be a witness to these two* also.

They then broke up the meeting, connected with each other, thanked the priests for their offers of space for Sunday afternoon, and six churches signed up to use the two parishes that next week.

The rest of the church representatives organized joint services, including the two synagogue families together. Some were to meet outside, others in various small spaces that were believed to be available. A sense of forward progress was achieved and although they all still felt blitzed by what had happened, their spirits rose. The trial was not going to go away overnight, nor be magically fixed by human effort. They all knew this.



*Screegion dismissed the four demons, who all turned dark green and then vanished. Screegion alone hung from the ceiling and watched the church humans depart. “We will all have a belch together at headquarters. These dumbass believers,” he said with a sneer, “think they’re going to survive this.” And then the demon turned a particularly putrid shade of sewer-sludge green and—whoosh—vanished.*

19

The week went by amazingly quickly, after that evening meeting. The people from the twenty congregations were not taking the holes casually and they were not pretending to be super-spiritual. All twenty congregations, which comprised just under 2,000 people, were feeling a common but intensely powerful loss. As their people wandered by their church addresses, they wept, stared into the holes, and experienced a very unique kind of corporate astonishment. Interestingly most of the churches were independent, and not part of any larger denomination or affiliation. Two were Southern Baptist, one was Evangelical Free Church affiliated. As those three pastors talked to their denominational headquarters later that week, they received responses of sympathy and prayer but no denomination has a so-called department of building disappearance. Many of the congregations had built their own buildings, meaning they not only did the fund-raising but contributed countless hours of labor and design creativity. Obviously, in most cases they also had contributed thousands and thousands of dollars to their projects. All of the buildings were not new. In five cases the churches had purchased existing properties, renovated, and repurposed the interiors, added parking and delighted in making a “new wine skin from an old.”

Cohen wrote on Santa Fe Today, “Two Thousand Church People Homeless Overnight.” He had done the work of asking each pastor how many people were in each congregation, totaled it up, and found that the twenty congregations made up about 1,930 adults.

And there was the crux of the crisis: they were physically homeless, as church congregations. The twenty holes were identical not in footprint, but in the character of each hole. Cleanly excavated, no wires of conduits or pipes hanging loose—they were all crisply severed at ground’s edge. Each hole exactly matched where exterior walls were and where driveway overhangs had been. This was not the work of explosives or incendiary devices. There were also no machinery tracks

around, as if somehow, miraculously, a conspiracy had hired silent excavators who were able to remove all church buildings overnight. Each site almost resembled archaeological digs or museum-grade displays. That, in itself, completely enchanted almost everybody. Everybody except Cohen and McConnell. Even the Air Force captain, who was now officially designated as the government's on-site investigator, felt for the people. Cohen and McConnell, though certainly not in league with each other, held a more detached attitude. They shared comments like, "This is bizarrely like *Star Trek*" or "Why don't these people realize that worse things could happen, like what if some of their people had disappeared?" While she found no deep affection for her journalist colleague in this, McConnell found herself matched quite evenly in newsperson-coldness to this tragedy.

As Sunday morning neared, each congregation had plans in place for a worship service. The two synagogues planned to combine for their service, meeting at a school made available by the principal, who attended Temple Beit Lehem. Santa Fe Christian Assembly and New Beginnings Christian Fellowship were a natural match-up and would meet outdoors, weather permitting, with chairs provided by each family at a local baseball diamond. A strange one-week *marriage* would be experienced by Every Nation Baptist Church and The King is Coming Church, which could hardly be further apart on the theological spectrum. They would meet at ten o'clock at the Mariah Living Spaces plant, a modern manufacturing facility of 8,000 square feet.

Sunday morning dawned, one week after twenty buildings had cleanly and still inexplicably vanished, and the lives of some 1,900 New Mexican Christians and Jews were changed forever.

20

At each of the locations where the churches and the synagogues met for worship, songs were sung, prayers were prayed and sermons were preached. A few met outside because the weather was beautiful and some met indoors. Some of the churches printed a makeshift bulletin. Almost all of the people from each fellowship attended services that morning. "Who would miss it?" said one of the pastors. Without words to parse it, they all knew they were in the midst of a great reset for their churches, if not for the wider community too. Although it was rarely



acknowledged publicly, Santa Fe was glad to have churches and synagogues around.

Each pastor did his best to make some small sense to his people of what had happened to their buildings. None knew how or why, but still a pastor is needed to bring courage and biblical perspective to any major happening—especially to those where the church people are not the cause of the happening. For the Christian Assembly/New Beginnings joint service, Pastor Moniz spoke from Acts chapter 4 where Peter and John, apostles, were thrown in jail. His friend Steve Menendez emceed the service and shared some very passionate and warm commentary on where the church might be headed now.

The King is Coming/Every Nation conglomerate was actually a strangely joyful service. Pastors Juarez and Whittier decided to preach half a message each, kind of tag-team preaching. They chose together to speak from Hebrews 11, focusing on verse 16.

> But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Bob Cohen stood in the back of the Christian Assembly/New Beginnings gathering, which was an outdoor meeting. Someone offered him a chair which he took to the side of the front area and seated himself. The crowd sang a string of songs which Cohen did not know but found, despite himself, invigorating. He was not a churchman in any sense but he was savvy enough to detect when someone, or a group of someones, were being authentic. Nothing could be more authentic than this first Sunday when church people were meeting to do their thing without any of the comforts or usual conveniences with which they were all accustomed to enjoying. *I have to admit,* he thought to himself, *these people really want to be here today.*

Other reporters and journalists found themselves at all the other services. A broadcast truck sat in the parking lot of Santa Maria all day and reported generically, as three congregations held services in the chapel, one after another in the afternoon. Father Frank found himself very tired by that evening. CNN's Mindy McConnell attended the joint-synagogue meeting on Saturday evening. There was

a homemade banner which read, “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God” in Hebrew and English. She did not know where it came from, but it rang in her mind with power. Rafael Donner shared other words which did not sound Old Testament to her. Without saying where the line came from, Donner said, “It has been said,

> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

The mention of Solomon sounded Old Testament-like. The people all nodded in agreement and the rabbi expounded on those words that “Our heavenly Father will feed us, take care of us, provide for us too.”

Mindy had a quizzical look on her face and then glanced at Karen Asnat, who had a look of peace on hers. McConnell watched her as if she expected Karen to stand and make some big announcement that would explain everything. Karen said nothing and sang none of the songs—just sat quietly.

The rest of Santa Fe’s Sunday went on as normal. Nothing was closed, no other unusual activities. The Air National Guard helicopters and the government officials had all departed on Saturday as did the state police, with no leads to really investigate as to why the holes had appeared, and the buildings disappeared, and back to semi-normal. The news cycle was moving on and now, the work of pondering and figuring lay with the people themselves. What would happen now? Would anyone discover reasons for the happening? Would these disappearances change the lives of the 1,930 adults that made up what seemed to be the bulk of the conservative religious Christian community? Plus two synagogues. No one could speculate. It was an unnerving place to be in.

## 21

Monday. Eight days now. The New Mexico governor, Lucille Grimley, had always been an advocate for the vulnerable. She had worked to uncover nursing home



violations, had labored hard in legal cases for compromised senior citizens and had made her way to the governor’s office on a growing reputation of compassion and concern for those least able to defend themselves.

She lowered herself down into the Christian Assembly void with New Mexico State Police Trooper Avon Duvall and Jim Pappas, from, oddly, the Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Cultural Affairs. Since she knew Pappas was right in Santa Fe and could be summoned quickly, Grimley called him Sunday night and asked him to meet her at the Christian Assembly hole. No one really wanted to call the sites holes but since the first day, and Santa Fe Day had tagged them holes, the word had rocketed into the local vernacular overnight. No pastors were objecting or thought the term crass; that’s what they were: clean, carved, surgical incisions.

Grimley and Pappas dropped down on ropes and stood on a flat, dirt floor, evenly graded. She said, “Jeff, it sure smells nice down here.”

He sniffed. “I don’t smell anything except dirt, Governor,” he said.

“Huh. Really? That’s funny. Let’s look closely at this thing, shall we?”

They each had good cell phone cameras and took some close-up shots of the walls and the floor. There wasn’t really much else to see. There was no discoloration and no other smells. But when Grimley took off a glove to better adjust her cell, she placed her hand on the dirt wall and let out a shriek. Her hand burned.

Above, Trooper Duvall called down, “What is wrong? Are you alright, Governor?”

She called back up, “I’m okay except when my hand touched the side, it burned me.”

Pappas looked at her hand and it looked scalded. But there was no steam and nothing else to see on the surface of the wall. He called up, “We don’t see any reason for this burn, Officer. Could you throw down a towel please?” Duvall ran over to his vehicle, grabbed a white towel, and threw it down to the governor.

She wiped her hand with the towel carefully and scraped off some skin which gave some blood, but she wasn’t in terrific pain. Pappas thought, *what is on these walls?*

In his knapsack he had placed a Tupperware cup and plastic spoon. He must have had some vague awareness of the possibility of finding something archaeological. He scraped some dirt into the cup being careful not to touch it with his fingers. He placed the cup in his knapsack and sat it on the floor.

Grimley wrapped her hand with the towel gingerly. It didn't hurt so bad but since there wasn't anything else to survey, she decided she'd had enough hands-on investigation of this hole. She climbed up out of the hole, followed by Pappas, and stood on the lip, looking back. Duvall said, "Let me have a look at that hand, Governor."

She held out her hand and he carefully unwrapped the towel. Yes, her palm was burned and some skin was pulled off. He held her hand to his nose to smell it, which she thought was odd. He said, "Governor, do you know what this smells like?"

She held it to her own nose and sniffed. "No, but you're right there is an odor. Does it seem familiar to you?"

Duvall said, "It is familiar, but I hope I'm wrong. It smells something like a superacid that I became familiar with when I worked at a chemical company in Albuquerque. I wasn't always a public servant, Governor."

"A what?" she said.

Duvall explained, "A superacid is stronger than sulphuric acid. They are used in conjunction with other chemicals in all kinds of complicated processes. It eats through most anything in concentrated form. I would say what you touched wasn't too concentrated but let me rinse your hand from my water bottle and let's get you to the ER."

Pappas said, "We'll follow you, Officer." And Duvall jumped into the RAM, hit the lights and Pappas and the governor followed. It took them ten minutes to arrive after Pappas had called ahead. A medical team was waiting at the entrance.





The State Police RAM pulled into the Presbyterian Santa Fe Medical Center, followed by Jim Pappas' black Honda Ridgeline. They were met by two nurses and an ER physician who all appeared nervous since learning their incoming patient was Governor Grimley. They asked Pappas who he was, and he said, "I'm working with the governor today," as he quickly presented a state ID badge.

"Let's get you inside, Governor," said Dr. Smythe.

"It is hurting, doc, and I am glad to have your services with no warning," Grimley said, smiling.

They walked the governor and Pappas into the facility, and immediately showed them to a cubicle where Grimley sat on an examination table and Pappas sat in a chair. She pulled out her cell phone and called her office to explain where she was and what was happening.

The doctor, with a nurse standing nearby, carefully unbound the towel from her hand and looked carefully at it. His assessment was that yes, it was burned and looked chemical. He swabbed the site gingerly and placed the swab into a plastic tube and asked the nurse to get it to the lab immediately.

"I think we can treat this for you, Governor."

"For today, doc, call me Lucy," she answered.

The doctor smiled and said again, "Lucy, it appears you have encountered some kind of toxic chemical. I won't know what it is, of course, until the lab reports to me but for now we will give it a good rinse. Please stand over here at the sink. You'll need to keep your hand under the water for about ten minutes, please. That will rinse it well."

Grimley did so and leaned back on the counter and let out a big sigh. Pappas said, "Wasn't on our to-do list for today, Governor," trying to lighten the air.

“No,” she said, “but I am completely blown away that this happened to me. As if the holes were not mystery enough, now there’s some kind of corrosive material in the dirt. It seems to me that makes at least that site a hazardous location, don’t you think?”

“Yes, Governor, it sure seems that way. But do we really want to rope off all these places from the public? That would instill more fear, and is anyone really going to be roping down into the holes as we did?”

“Point taken, Jim. But at least we need to let the pastors know. Perhaps for the moment, they can tactfully ask their people not to do any rappelling until more investigation is done, without announcing to the public that the holes are dangerous. Not yet anyway.”

“My specialty isn’t civil defense or public health, it is historic preservation. But I agree. Since for the moment I am your only assistant would you like me to get the word to the church leaders? I think I can do that quickly,” Pappas offered. The governor gladly accepted his offer and added, “Be careful what you tell these people. You can say that there is some hazard, we have learned, and they will be told more later. Start with the guy who does the local web news. I don’t know his name but his site is called Santa Fe Day, I think.”

Pappas said, “Yeah, I glanced at it this early this morning. He seems to be a go-to guy in this. He will know who to call. Maybe he can help me, too.”

“Then off with you, Jim. I’ve got my key administrator coming here in a while. I’ll be fine. Thank you so much for being with me today. I really appreciate it and will always have a soft place in my heart for our Department of Cultural Affairs,” the governor said.

“And Historic Preservation,” Pappas added.

“Yes, of course, and you and I now have our own little shared piece of New Mexico history,” and they both laughed. Pappas was out the door, and Grimley sat and looked at the wall with its usual generic medical posters about cardiac physiology and the pulmonary effects of smoking.





Karen Asnat opened the mailbox in the foyer of her apartment building and pulled out three occupant mailings, two bills, and one personally addressed piece of mail with no return address. She opened it and found a letter which read:

> **To Karen:**
> **In relation to the recent church disappearances and that of your synagogue I recommend for you to research the newly corrosive nature of the soil in the excavated spaces**

She thought, *what the heck?*

> **Perhaps you would feel most comfortable exploring the soil at Temple Beit Lehem which is your church home**

*My what?*

> **I give you this to note the soil is coated with a residue which is similar to what your chemists would call a superacid**

*My chemists?*

> **It really is not a superacid, as you would understand it . . .**

*Definitely above my pay grade*, she thought.

> **. . . but it resembles one Do a chemical quantitative analysis on what you can extract Be careful not to touch the soil itself however as it will severely burn your skin**

The text of the letter seemed word-processed in that it wasn’t in a normal, cursive hand. But it was a very odd and strange kind of text. Karen had never seen the font

or the formatting before. The paper was also unusual; a longish piece, narrow and of a weave also new to her. “Huh,” she said, before she even took in the letter itself.

It went on,

> **When you have completed a quantitative analysis you will learn some more about the source of the disappearances  I wish you Meshiach’s blessing and this wisdom for you**
>
> **The mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust**
>
> Μιχαὴλ

Karen fell back slightly against the wall. She quickly looked around expecting to see the sender standing there right there. But she was alone. The editor in her thought, *this is a perfect letter, kind of. Short. Direct. Warm. But there is no punctuation. And yet there is capitalization. So flipping weird. And, uh, kind of refreshing*. But her raw humanness made her scared and unnerved. She could not remember when a single piece of mail had unsettled her as did this one in her hand. At least not one since the last letter from her former boyfriend.

She folded it and put it back in its envelope, put it in her purse and went back to her car. She got in, pushed the START button—not really knowing where to go but feeling an urgency to go. Then she looked up through the windshield and said, with tears in her eyes now, “Lord, show me what to do.”

She pulled out of the parking lot and thought, *I need to find someone to go with me over to Temple Beit Lehem.* The thought came into her mind, *there was a man sent from God.* She couldn’t remember where she had heard that, but it stuck in her head. Maybe God will send me someone today, she imagined.  Then she remembered the CNN reporter and recalled that she had her number in her phone. Her car was running but she hit the reporter’s number. Mindy McConnell immediately answered.

“McConnell, CNN,” came the voice.



“Ms. McConnell this is Karen Asnat from Santa Fe. We met briefly at that meeting at the Catholic church. I am from Temple Beit Lehem, one of the synagogues that disappeared. The synagogue family didn’t disappear, our building disappeared.” She was nervous to talk to a reporter.

McConnell chuckled and said, “Yes, Karen, I remember you. How can I help you?”

Karen went on, “Um. Do you have time to meet me today? There’s something new, I think, and I don’t really know who to talk to. It’s probably stupid to talk to a reporter but your name just came to me.”

Mindy replied, “Of course. Where do you want to meet?”

“There is a coffee shop called Alamos Brew near the Temple Beit Lehem place. Can you meet me there?” Karen inquired.

“Yes, I can do that. When?”

“Soon, if that is possible?

McConnell answered, “How about in twenty minutes?”

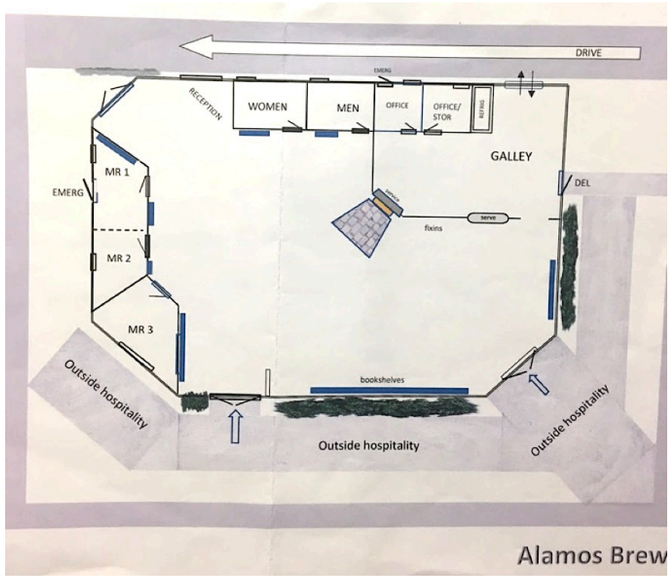
Karen felt relief and said, “I will see you there.”

24

Alamos Brew was as hipster a coffee shop as you could imagine. There were no brand-name products mentioned anywhere. Even the sweeteners available for the beverages were home-grown offerings—turbinado, honey, and something that was in a cannister with native American drawings on it, called mapsliado. There were woven tapestries around and it was dark, which suited Karen’s mood well. The Brew, as Karen called it, was a favorite place for coffee and visits.

Karen seated herself after ordering a large house blend. She added some milk and some mapsliado. She pulled out the letter again and put it on the table. McConnell came in, waved at Karen, and ordered a latte of some sort. She sat down and greeted Karen, “This month certainly is unusual, isn’t it?”

"Yes, it really is," replied Karen. "Thank you for meeting me. Take a look at this, please," and shoved the letter over to McConnell. Mindy opened it, read it, put it down, then read it again. Then she did something Karen did not expect. McConnell held it to her nose and sniffed it.




"Does it have any fragrance to you, Karen?"

Karen took it and smelled it. One eyebrow lifted and she said, "Yes, it reminds me of honey." She got up and went over to what was labeled the *aditivos* bar, picked up the honey bear dispenser and smelled it. It gave off no real odor. "Nothing," she said.

"Weird," McConnell said. "At each hole in the ground, some people say they detect a faint fragrance which reminds them of honey and yet honey really has very little smell, unless it is made from a blossom with a strong fragrance of its own. Usually in this country that is not the case. Standard honey is from clover and as such is odorless. So why does this letter have the same fragrance as people seem to be finding at the holes? And who is this—what is this—Greek person who wrote this to you?"



"I have no idea," Karen said. "It was there today in my mailbox. Then I felt a strong urge to go over to the hole, as you say, that was my synagogue. Would you go with me? I know it's a last-minute request."

"This is a really cryptic letter," McConnell said. "Might it be a scam of some kind, or someone you know that's playing with your head? People do that, ya know. They get wind of a news story, some of the names in the news, then for a prank or maybe some darker reason, they role-play some fantasy of their own . . . at the victim's expense. Do you think that may be behind this letter?"

"Yes," Karen said, "that was my first thought. But I could not imagine anyone picking me out of all the people in this thing. I did go to that first meeting and I am a member of Temple Beit Lehem. But I am not anyone special. And maybe there is something else I can tell you . . ."

McConnell thought, *now we're getting to it, maybe.* "Sure, go ahead. I'll keep it confidential if you want."

Karen went on, "For some time, and I really don't know why, I have come to believe that . . ." she hesitated, ". . . that Jesus was the Messiah. And here's the thing. I think I am not alone."

McConnell fought with any show of surprise. She didn't want to spook Karen. She just listened with a dispassionate look. It kept Karen talking.

But Karen stopped and looked straight at McConnell, consciously feeling a risk in continuing. "It was a couple of years ago, maybe a little longer. There was no trauma in my life or anything. I was raised Jewish and never had any big disillusionment with that. It was my faith, my parents', my grandparents', you know. Then I dated a guy for a while who was really nice but he wasn't Jewish. He told me he had started believing in Jesus. He didn't push it on me but told me how he had started believing in Jesus. Then he moved to the east coast and that, as they say, was that. We e-mailed some you know. Life moved on, I guess. But some of the things he had talked about, about Jesus *fit* somehow in my own heart." She shook her head for a minute but went on. "I dunno why I'm telling you this, but you

came into my head today. All these churches and two synagogues just disappear. So darn weird."

Mindy looked at her, as if running a BSMR—bull-shit mind reading—scan on the spot. She and some of her fellow journalists had made up that acronym, and she was good at it, and it came up clean. This woman was trusting her, vulnerable, scared and telling her some private stuff. She said, "Damn Karen, I'm following you."

Karen said, "Can we run by the site, together? It's still early."

McConnell said, "Sure. Let's go. I'll drive. Can you leave your car here for a while?"

Karen knew the owner and the servers at the coffee shop and said, "I'll tell them I'll be back in a while, and they'll be fine with it."

The two drove off in the CNN van and pulled up to the site of Temple Beit Lehem. It was not deserted. A black Honda Ridgeline was parked there in the smallish parking lot. A fellow was kneeling at the edge, scraping the soil with a small hand spade and putting some soil into a plastic cannister. McConnell and Karen got out of the van and walked over to the man. He was friendly and introduced himself as Jim Pappas from the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division. He gave them each his business card and McConnell gave him hers.

McConnell said, "Seems like something fairly significant wasn't preserved here, wouldn't you say, Mr. Pappas?"

He chuckled. "I'd say not. Or if not preserved, removed."

"What?" Karen asked. "What do you mean removed?"

"Quite a bit of investigation has already occurred at all the sites. None of them give any appearance of a natural disaster, sink holes, volcanic activity, and even meteor strikes have been bantered about. Another theory is some kind of terrorist activity did this, really coordinated and all that. But there isn't any evidence of violence, explosives or anything that lies within natural causes or terrorist causes. None of that makes any sense anyway. Each place looks like it was beamed up. Clean. Gone.



Leaving behind some sort of acidic or corrosive residue. Makes me think of that movie with Danny Glover, *Predator 2*, when at the end . . . never mind. I'm talking way too much."

"As I'm sure you are aware," he looked at her card again, "Ms. McConnell, there *is* something toxic about the soil. The governor was at one of the sites yesterday and I was with her. We went down into that hole and the governor wasn't wearing gloves and her hand was burned by the soil." The women grew visibly concerned.

"She's okay, but it was like a severe acid burn on her hand. I came by here to get a sample of the soil and I'm going to get it tested. So far only a few of the holes have had samples taken. This," he pointed to the dirt in the cannister, "is going to the Forensic lab over at the DPS complex. And the other thing, some people—not all—say they can detect a strange but not bad smell. I don't know*, smell* isn't the right word. *Fragrance* is better. Almost like the kind of thing one would purchase—essential oils or something like that."

Karen impulsively pulled the letter out of her purse. She held it again to her own nose and then offered it to Pappas, who sniffed it.

"Damn. That's the idea. What is that?"

McConnell felt the need to take control of this conversation. She said, "Look, Mr. Pappas, we're glad to meet you and all and yes, lots of heads are starting to pay attention to this thing. We're over a week into this story, um, I mean situation and there are still no answers. It's like more and more puzzle pieces are getting laid on the table but there's no puzzle box to see what the big picture is."

Karen interrupted. She was looking down into the hole and said, "This is a letter that came in my mailbox today, Mr. Pappas. I showed it to Mindy. It relates to this incident I think, but it is signed in Greek." Pappas asked to see it, read it, and said, "This word is Greek for Michael."

25

Pappas asked, "So who is Michael?"

Karen rolled her eyes and answered, “I have no idea. I cannot think of a Michael that I know who would write me a letter like this. Did you notice there is no punctuation? My job is editing, and it is obvious that this person deliberately left out any punctuation. And by the way, I have no idea what quantitative analysis is. This person said I should get one or do one or something, here. Or suggested it.”

McConnell stepped back and walked a way around the Temple Beit Lehem hole. Pappas continued the conversation. “I know what that is. I was something of a chemist before I started doing historic preservation work. To do a quantitative analysis is to study the amounts and varieties of various chemicals in a sample of something. Actually, that is one of the things I am requesting the DPS Forensic Lab to do with this sample,” pointing at the plastic cannister of dirt in his hand. “That’s not exactly within their purview, but they can do it fastest. And I have the authority to request it.”

“Can I be in on the results, please?” Karen asked.

“I don’t see why not, Karen. You’re a player here and the governor hasn’t locked down information about this thing. She’s got the feds asking her lots of questions, I know, but she hasn’t told me not to talk to anyone. Yet.”

“How long will it take?” she then asked.

“I . . . we should hear something tomorrow,” and he smiled.

Karen then said, “Maybe I’ll wait on the rappelling descent then, for now,” and laughed.

McConnell came back over, and said, “How about we all go somewhere for a drink?” Pappas and Karen agreed, and off they went to find a pub or something. It was sundown anyway.

26

First thing the next morning Pappas got an e-mail from the DPS Forensics Lab inviting him to come by as soon as possible. He gulped a breakfast burrito from his freezer, washed it down with a Starbucks bottled Frappuccino double shot espresso



with cream, and jumped into this truck, while imagining death by fat grams and hypercaffeine infusion. As he drove to the lab he thought, *why didn’t they e-mail me the report”* He parked in the lot, walked into the lab, showed his ID, and went to the TEST RESULTS counter. A lab worker whose badge read *Tina* asked him for his request number, which he provided, and she rifled through the out-basket items.

“Yeah, Mr. Pappas, this is the one we did last night that was quite puzzling. You’re on the church hole project, right?”

“That’s right,” he said but thought the term was somewhat crass.

“This is really interesting,” Tina said, as she laid out the report on the counter. “The sample you sent comes down to this: you’ve got mostly fluoroantimonic acid which is $HSbF_6$. It is formed by mixing hydrogen fluoride and antimony pentafluoride. Various mixtures produce a superacid but mixing equal ratios of the two acids produces the strongest superacid known. But here’s the kicker—you’ve also got three distinct *other* compounds which, I’m sorry, are unknown.”

Pappas shook his caffeine-addled head. “They’re what?”

“That’s right,” Tina said. “Three completely unknown compounds are in this soil sample. At least unknown to any process this lab can do for you. But we’re up to date. If it’s all right with you I would like to keep the sample here, isolated to watch for any changes. This is such a strange thing it might be unstable.”

“Um yea, sure,” Pappas said. “I can get more of that soil any time. Are you sure about this—I mean, I was a lab chemist for a while and I know sometimes identification can be tricky in a QA and it takes some patience to identify an unknown composition.”

“I am quite sure,” Tina replied. “I can run it all again if you want but I am certain there are three pieces of this puzzle that are completely unspecified.”

Out of nowhere, Pappas thought of *Star Trek* when the away-team would encounter a metal that was “completely unspecified.” He shook that off.

“Alright, Tina, thank you,” Pappas said, slowly. “I’m not sure where to go with this but I will take this report and think about it.”

“Sign this form please, that you have retrieved the report,” she said.

Pappas signed it, walked out of the lab, and got into his truck. He called Karen Asnat immediately and told her the intriguing—would she find it disturbing? —result.

* * * * *

The New Mexico Air National Guard Precision Acquisition Vehicle Entry helicopter, PAVE, in Pave Low, was cruising over Santa Fe at a thousand feet and abruptly hit something, midair, which caused it to autorotate severely. The pilot and flight engineer struggled to keep it from nosing over, a thing which was hard to make a chopper do, but slamming into something invisible almost upturned it. The chopper slowly floated downward and then slammed into the ground, crushing all three landing gears, which were lowered. It’s six-blade main rotor whirled to a stop. The tail rotor kept spinning at speed and then began to wind down. The crew was knocked unconscious and stunned. As the tail rotor spun down, whining in complaint, the pilot came to, unbuckled, and looked at the engineer. He had a head gash from the shattered windshield, and was bleeding, but he was awake. The pilot unstrapped him, pulled him free and they both struggled out the service door of the chopper. Both engines were coughing thick smoke but there wasn’t a fire on either side. The crewmen crawled away and sat up and looked at their bird. The pilot wrapped his kerchief around the engineer’s scalp and forehead and the bleeding seemed to slow.

“What happened?” the flight engineer yelled.

“I dunno,” yelled back the pilot. “We hit something. Nothing on terrain-following radar and no communication alert. We just hit something. But I didn’t see anything in front of us. Did you?”

“I did not. We couldn’t have had a more beautiful day for flying, and my daughter has an outdoor recital tonight. Guess I might not make that,” the engineer said, still yelling. The Pave Low was almost dead but was still grumbling loudly. They moved back further, and the pilot pulled out his cell phone to call their base.



Then the pilot noticed a large hole in the ground, with a sign nearby that looked odd next to the large, cavernous maw--which read, “New Beginnings Fellowship.”

27

*Screegion and the little squad got a kick out of it. They were doomed and they knew it but until the appointed time, they took every opportunity to cause mischief. They were waiting at 1,000 feet in altitude, as humans measure it, for the Pave Low. They linked demonic appendages and, with no effort at all, let the chopper slam into them. Demon interaction with this world is not permanent but given certain occasions they can physically interact. They can camp out in a human mind and body. They can sometimes even do it together, in multiples--though that is no harmonious camping trip. They can connect with animals, though that generally makes the animal completely lose its animal rationality. They can stand on human structures, and they can move through the earth's atmosphere. Sometimes they can interfere with earthly physics, chemistry, geology, and humanity's pitiful little sciences. Generally, they were bored with them. But sometimes something was up and they wanted to create problems. They were not allowed to end the lives of humans, but they could sometimes mess them up.*

*As the pilot and flight engineer of the Pave Low crawled out of their broken helicopter, they didn't know it but the five demons were cackling and slobbering, still at a thousand feet. Then they wafted away like some putrid gas cloud. Screegion knew that they were near one of the holes. He didn't really know what it was all about but delighted in the disappearances of so many churches. It spat a demon wad down at them, which—to its vision—just flamed and then evaporated.*

Unseen to them, was another spirit being. He was an angel. He had a name, too, Κύριος αγαπά in Greek but in human speech there really was no translation of most angelic names, but we'll call him Kuriosagapa. He watched the Pave Low autorotate. He flashed to its underbelly and with his wings which were large and strong, slowed its descent. He didn't grimace because it was, to him, not heavy. It was about his duty to the pilot. He had known, and watched, and cared for the pilot since his birth in Spokane, Washington, and even knew some things about him before his birth. Air National Guard Lieutenant Bruce Peter Philipsburg, was five foot nine inches tall, weighing 178 pounds, now thirty-seven years old, German grandparents on one side and Cheyenne and English on the other, a plain lineage



all the way back as far as anyone wanted to know, married, had one son who was currently fifteen, loved Corvettes, a lifelong fan of the Los Angeles Dodgers, secretly weakened with a propensity for alcohol addiction, genetically pre-disposed to kidney trouble, is given 29,565.4 days on planet Earth, thus far having generated 104,391 hairs on his head, made spiritually alive and regenerated by the grace of God at twenty years old, struggled with showing his emotions, mentally fascinated by theology and the Bible, wonderfully in love with his wife Sarah, who was also raised in Spokane, owned a preference for chicken over turkey, does not like lemons, adores country music, chews gum constantly, preferably spearmint, picked up helicopters unusually fast and had a natural grasp of their piloting; when weary could lose his cool, no patience with people who struggle with depression; loves Harleys, hates motocross bikes, likes the color blue, doesn't care about national politics but reads espionage stories, memorizes baseball statistics, and on and on. Kuriosagapa loved his work of watching out for Bruce and did not tire of it. The Lord had assigned Bruce to the angel and it was a perfect assignment. He was completely fascinated by this human pilot, who always wanted to fly and most specifically, had found faith in the Savior in his twentieth year, as humans mark time.

*Kuriosagapa had seen Screegion and the others, did not interfere with their bludgeoning of the Pave Low but just did his job with Bruce and the flight engineer. They were not seriously injured, and their chopper lay, smoking, next to the hole where Bruce's church had been, New Beginnings Fellowship in Santa Fe, New Mexico, United States, Planet Earth, year . . . angels mark time differently than humans.*

28

Bob Cohen was on it—a helicopter crash on the north side of town, near the site of the New Beginnings Fellowship hole. He raced his Jeep over there but was barred from entering the crash site, even with his now-known identity in the area.

Mindy McConnell was also there and had the antenna raised for satellite uplink. Also present were Air National Guard troops, State Police officers and a crowd of random lookers-on. Cohen scanned the crowd to see who he could talk to. He went over to McConnell who was on her cell. She nodded to him and moved away to continue her conversation in a quieter place. Cohen then noticed Karen Asnat

which surprised him. He wondered why she would be here and walked over to re-introduce himself.

“Ms. Asnat, Bob Cohen for Santa Fe Day,” he said.

“Yes, Bob, I remember you. How are you?” she answered.

“Good. Can I ask what drew you here?” he inquired.

“Sure, yeah. I don’t know actually. I had been at the Temple Beit Lehem site and was talking to a fellow named Jim Pappas about the soil. And I saw the helicopter go over our synagogue and then about five minutes later I saw it go down and felt a pull to hurry over. I dunno. To see if there is anything I could do, ya know?”

“Wow,” he said “So you saw the chopper go down? Can you tell me about it?”

Karen looked over at the helicopter. “Uh, it’s actually one of my deepest fears. To see a plane crash. Well, this wasn’t a plane. And I guess the two crewmen are okay—they’re over there.” She pointed to where some medics were attending the pilot and flight engineer. The dead chopper was covered in foam.

“You know, people always look up sort of automatically when a helicopter flies over and that’s why I was watching it. But then it just sort of stopped mid-air. Not like it was slowing up, it just came to a stop, like it hit something—but it didn’t. And there was no noise. Then it floated down. It seemed like it was being carefully, um, held . . . and then just set down, sort of. I don’t know, Mr. Cohen, that’s what I saw.”

Cohen looked at her. “Uh. What do you mean *being held*, by what?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “That’s just my impression. Maybe someone else saw it too and you can ask them.”

“Yeah, right,” Cohen pulled back. “I think I’ll ask around a little. Were you with anyone else?”



“Not really, but I was on my cell with Mr. Pappas. He’s a fellow with the Historic Preservation Department, and he and I were talking about the soil sample,” she offered.

“What soil sample?” Cohen asked.

“He had taken some soil to a lab because the governor had her hand burned when they were down in one of the holes, so Mr. Pappas was talking to me about getting it tested. The result was strange. Wait, there he is. I wonder why he came over here?” She pointed to a man about fifty feet away.

Jim Pappas had not seen the helicopter go down but he had heard the thing happen because he was on his way to the New Beginnings Fellowship hole to get a soil sample there. The Pave Low had dropped down about two hundred feet from his Ridgeline and Pappas was looking away. But he had jumped out and was the first one over to the pilot and flight engineer and met the rescue personnel when they arrived. Cohen approached him and he was on his cell too.

“Oh crap,” thought Pappas, as he recognized the website news scrounge.

“Bob Cohen, Santa Fe Day,” Cohen said and extended a handshake to Pappas.

Pappas took it and said, “Yeah, Jim Pappas, Historic Commission.”

“Did you see the crash? That lady over there thought you might know something.”

Pappas looked but saw no one. “It hit near my truck and I ran over to the crew. They’re okay I think.”

“I don’t know where she went, but the lady also said something about the governor and soil samples being tested?” Cohen probed.

“Look Mr. Cohen, I’m not sure if I should be talking to you or not,” Pappas balked.

“C’mon Mr. Pappas, give me something. It’s all going to come out and this is one long, ongoing story. If there’re any clues to what has happened to these churches,

why a National Guard chopper, for God's sake, goes down right next to one of them, which the lady said was a very strange crash, and you're in on it, help me out."

Pappas looked at the ground, knew he was stuck and did not feel inclined to walk away. He said, "Look I'm not your source on anything about the governor—CNN already blabbed about her anyway. But a soil sample was taken from the Temple Beit Lehem site and I had it tested at a forensics lab. The soil is highly corrosive and there's something else. The nature of the soil resembled a superacid. But there was other stuff in the sample that could not be identified by a simple quantitative analysis so a mass spectrometric analysis was then performed, *and* liquid chromatography tests were done. Same thing. There's something there that is unspecified, which is strange. We typically can tell any elements from this kind of testing."

Cohen was writing this all down in his notebook, but he wasn't sure exactly what he was going to do with it. His readers were going to glaze over words like *spectrometric* and *chromo*-whatever-*ography* and shit.

"Alright, thanks Mr. Pappas, here's my card if you think of anything else," Cohen released him.

Pappas walked away, relieved to get away and went back over to the Air Force ambulance to talk once more to the crewmen.

Cohen went back to the CNN van and caught McConnell's eye who wasn't on her phone now. She said, "Hi Bob. This is getting deeper and deeper isn't it?"

"What happened to the governor? She got burned, I hear?" he said.

"Yeah, she got her hand burned, some kind of chemical burn, they told me."

Cohen offered, "That Historic Commission guy told me they're struggling to figure out if something corrosive is in the holes or not. He says they're not sure what's there. Do you know anything about that?" he asked. She looked quizzically at him.

"No, I didn't have that. Bizarre, eh?"



Cohen laughed. "Yeah, that's the word. I wonder if this story is going to really tie up neatly and we all move on to something else boring."

Pappas told the National Guard airmen he was glad they were okay and hoped the flight engineer's daughter would forgive him missing her recital. Then he started walking back to his truck when he saw Karen Asnat, standing alone, looking at the chopper wreckage. He went over to her. She looked at him and smiled, but before she could say anything, at that moment, as they stood together, a warm glow appeared a few feet in front of them. It quickly turned into a person. Pappas and Asnat were stunned. They looked around but no one else seemed to see the person. The person was tall, maybe eight feet, and it was a man. They were looking at his face so intently they didn't notice anything else. First, he said nothing and looked at them, through them, and upon them. He was expressionless but projected a feeling of an indescribable and powerful benevolence. He remained silent and motionless, as a high mountain does not move but looks majestic.

29

As with nearly every human in the Bible who ever encountered an angel, Pappas and Asnat were struck at first with terror. If other people have encountered angels, no reliable record exists of that and yet one can only conjecture that their initial reactions would duplicate the experiences of people like the prophet Daniel, Zechariah, Mary the mother of Jesus as a young woman, Mary Magdalene, and John. Pappas and Asnat stood there, mouths hanging open.

Karen thought, *my God, what have I done now?*

Pappas thought, *shades of the Book of Mormon!*

The angel fixed his gaze on the two people. He was not interested in the rest of the people who were nearby, except perhaps in giving a quick glance at Bruce Philipsburg sitting on the back of the ambulance. The angel stood motionless, but with a white semi-glow and a slight yellow cast. In every way he was alien to planet Earth but he seemed perfectly at ease. Pappas moved a foot, to steady his balance. Asnat cleared her throat.

The angel said, “I know you are frightened but fear not. I am, to your hearing, Kuriosagapa. James, you are intrigued with the disappearance of the church buildings. Karen, you are sad and also mystified. You received a letter from Μιχαὴλ ὁ ἀρχάγγελος. I placed it in your mailbox. The archangel has not oft communicated directly with humans. His duties are glorious and high. But he was ordered to do so with you. Did you understand the letter?”

His voice was like no human voice. It carried no accent and was neither high nor low pitched, yet a combination of both. It was in fact, beautiful. Like nothing either human had ever heard. Later, they parsed it as the beauty of French, the command of German, the dignity of Queen Elizabeth, the complexity of Japanese, and the warm familiarity of Mid-western American English, all blended together with other facets wholly alien and yet also intensely wonderful.

Karen stared, speechless still. Pappas moved closer to her. The angel waited patiently, giving no sense of haste. He looked into Karen’s eyes with love, as if he had known her for years. She glanced at his face, then looked away and then looked back. Her feeling of fear and threat started to melt away. For a moment she wondered if she was hallucinating. But she could feel the ground under her feet, and she could still hear the sounds of the other people nearby, though they seemed muted. Oddly, she took Pappas’ hand and a faint glimmer of a smile came to the face of the angel. Then she said, “Sir, I cannot find words fit for this moment.” A tear fell upon her cheek. “Sir, is this real?”

Pappas wasn’t yet looking at the angel. He was trying not to, but he also felt himself begin to calm, here in the moment of whatever this was that was happening. The angel remained motionless, poised, like a perfectly contoured and sculpted baseball player, Pappas thought and was immediately embarrassed for thinking it. The angel moved his gaze back and forth between Karen’s and Jim’s face. Waiting. He laughed a warm angelic laugh, and he didn’t need to repeat himself, but he answered her question, “Yes Karen this is real. How could it not be real?” She continued to stare.

Finally, an answer to his question came to her. “The letter was like nothing I have ever read before. I did not know who it was from and I must confess, sir, that at first, I feared it was a trick or a prank.”



“Understandable,” said the angel.

“It said that if I, uh, studied the soil at my synagogue I would get a start at understanding the disappearances. But I am still confused, sir.” She couldn’t think of addressing the angel with any other title. Using any name seemed way too familiar. The angel listened. So she continued.

“I don’t know what it means that some of what is in the soil is unknown.” She started to cry. The angel appeared unmoved in the incredible stillness. Pappas still stood motionless and a little spittle had escaped from the side of his mouth and slid down his lip.

Not knowing anything else to do, Karen continued. She pulled the letter from her purse, slowly, unconsciously fearing that any sudden movement would trigger a startled reaction from the visitor. She unfolded the letter and read, “I wish you Meshiach’s blessing And this wisdom for you the mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust.”

Nothing on the visitor moved, the glow was warm and unfading. He stared right at her almost looking through her, his eight feet of height towering but not particularly intimidating.

“Sir, I recognize the word ‘Meshiach.’ It is Messiah.” She dared to ask, “The writer knows the Messiah?” Her tone was not interrogative, more requesting.

The angel spoke slowly, “Μιχαὴλ certainly knows the Messiah.” Then he laughed. Another angel laugh! How wonderful, not human at all. Pappas and Asnat later remarked that they could have listened to that laugh for the rest of the week. “He is Jesus, the eternal Son, the Risen One. He is the Lord, the Creator and the Redeemer of humans. He is ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος, ὁ παντοκράτωρ. In your tongue, alpha and omega, Who is, Who was, Who is to come, the Almighty. It is no trivial thing to receive such a benediction from Michael, for Messiah’s blessing to be upon you, Karen Asnat of Santa Fe.” He went on, “These assemblies have lost their shelters. This is not without purpose and this you will see. But do not forget the final gem of wisdom which Michael imparts to you.”

She looked at the paper and read, “the mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust.”

“Indeed,” said Kuriosagapa, and smiled. Papas thought, *angels can smile*.

“And that will guide your path, as you quarry truth as diamonds, one gem at a time, you will have answers. But joy comes in trusting Messiah’s design and in His loyal love through your quest. Farewell . . . for now.” He held up his hand towards them. A warm breeze with a sweet fragrance, smooth, honey-like, utterly happy, passed over them. Their eyes watered and they felt a first-time gladness of a sort they would remember for the rest of their lives. He was gone. They were alone again. Pappas’ lower lip quivered. Tears streamed down Karen’s cheeks.

Cohen was walking towards them and called, “So are you two like a thing now?”

Karen was still holding Jim’s hand and they were still together facing the west. She snatched her hand back, turned red, and said, “No, no, Mr. Cohen, we’re trying to understand all that is happening and we both are kind of exhausted.”

“PPbbb. Fine. Why are you over here? You’re both being looked for right now, over *there*,” Cohen pointed back to the Pave Low wreck.

30

Air National Guard Lieutenant Bruce Philipsburg sat stiffly in his chair in the living room. Sarah brought him a fresh cup of coffee and sat down next to him on a dining



room chair. She said, “Pilot-husband-of-mine, how does your leg feel this morning?”

“It hurts. But there was nothing broken. I want to get flying again but the flight surgeon said I have to wait a month. At least I can go to work,” he said and shrugged. The incident had not really rattled him—his training had been excellent and he had already experienced a few close scrapes while flying choppers. But the thing that crawled around in his brain was, “Why did we go down right next to our church?” He didn’t say this to Sarah. He didn’t have to—it was in her thinking, too.

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and they could see it was their pastor, Steve Menendez. Sarah let him in and they hugged. The pastor came and sat down next to Bruce, and Sarah went to get him a cup of coffee.

“Man, Bruce, you know how to make a dramatic entrance at church! Too bad there was no church,” noted the pastor.

Bruce harrumphed, “That’s an affirmative.”

Sarah came back and handed the coffee to Pastor Steve and sat down on the couch.

“Bruce, how ya doing?” asked the pastor.

The pilot answered, “Alright, I guess. My leg hurts but I’m glad my crewman and I were not injured worse. He had a bad gash on his head but we got the bleeding under control and he has a concussion and will be out of flying action for at least two months. They just grounded me for a month. The thing is, we have no idea what we hit, or what hit us. Obviously, there’s going to be a board of inquiry but I really have no idea what to tell them. And they don’t know that we plopped down right in my own church’s back yard. I don’t think I’ll tell them that, unless they’re already on to it.”

“Let me ask you, pastor—how are *you* doing with all this?”

Steve shifted in the chair. “We’ve been meeting—myself and a few of the other pastors. Yeah, we’re praying too but the prayer times are empty to be honest with you. Something is going on way beyond just us and beyond Santa Fe too. We don’t

know what it is, and so what we pray for mainly is to be patient and wait on the Lord. Simple. Embarrassing too that we can't come up with any answers. It's across the board too, Bruce. The eighteen churches are all conservative churches and even the two synagogues are suspected of being Messianic."

Bruce's eyebrow went up. "Suspected? By whom? I would think we would welcome that."

"Yes, we do, Bruce. I mean suspected by those who do not approve of Jews being Christians, or vice versa. Even the Catholic guys don't know what to do with the fact that two synagogues also disappeared. And they're usually the ones who are smug and dispassionate about *anything* that happens. Their attitude is, *we've seen it all before*."

"You know, Pastor, there is one little thing that I didn't tell my Air Force investigators," added Philipsburg. "After we slammed into whatever it was that stopped us midair and the bird started to go down, for just a second I saw a slight glow and something felt like it was . . ." he looked intently at his pastor, ". . . holding us."

Pastor Steve was now the one with the raised eyebrow. "What do you mean, holding you?"

"I dunno—that's just how it seemed. It wasn't real obvious, but my crewman saw a faint glow too, and he was bleeding, but saw it. It wasn't there for long. But we both saw it. I have no idea what it was. The more I think about it the more it creeps me out, too. As the bird fell, it fell . . . um, gently. We hit hard for sure, but not so hard or with enough force to explode the machine. We had time to get out."

"Pastor, I need to ask you something. This is really off the record," he said.

"Yes, of course," was all Pastor Steve said. Sarah was quiet but looked like she knew the question that was coming.

Bruce looked around slightly, as if he almost expected he was being recorded. He lowered his voice slightly and asked, "Pastor could it be possible that some kind of



force-recon was going on. Um, that's military talk. I mean some kind of angelic activity was going on?"

Steve said, "You think you saw an angel?"

"No, no, I didn't say that," Bruce quickly replied. He knew that in his job such open talk could ground him permanently.

The pastor sat back and pulled out his phone, which Sarah thought was strange. He tapped a couple of times and then read, "'Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?' We don't have a lot of biblical data on this, Bruce. But there is some evidence that angels do help us, at least sometimes. We would love to be able to print out a whole job description about guardian angels but there is so little biblical material on that subject. There are also testimonies through the years of people who have *said* they have seen what they thought were angels but none of that can ever be verified. What you're telling me sure is interesting though. You have no other explanation? Some unusual thermal secret Air Force energy beam to save helicopters?"

Bruce and Sarah both laughed at that one. "Well, if the Air Force did have such a beam, I could have used it last year, that's for sure." Sarah fell back and let out a sigh. He was referring to a joint exercise when his helicopter almost collided with a C-130. It was the C-130 pilot's error.

"Where was the Secret Air Force Energy beam then?" Sarah said, "Hey, that would make a cool acronym—the SAFE beam!" All three laughed.

Bruce then got serious and recounted, "The air conditions were quiet. No indications of upcoming turbulence or any immanent changes in flying conditions. We're prepared for those, anyway. It was very normal flying weather. We were sent up to take some more aerial photos of the city and all the holes. As we approached New Beginnings Fellowship, I got kind of sad. That's what I was thinking when we got hit. We worked hard to put up our building, pastor. You know . . ."

"We did," Menendez agreed. "Took us five years. And then *wham* it's gone . . ." They were all quiet. "Bruce, I am so glad you're okay. And as we wait on the Lord,

and work to keep our church going with no facility, please be praying for us all and for the leaders."

"You bet, Pastor," Philipsburg said. "We will and we are. The Lord is in control, even if we can't see how."

Sarah said, "Pastor, I am so thankful for what Bruce has said. I don't know what it was that held them up but God gets the credit, the glory, and the praise from me."

"From me as well," Bruce agreed.

"Let's have prayer now, shall we?" Steve offered. The couple nodded, they stood and held hands. The pastor prayed.

31

Alamos Brew hosted another meeting related to the church holes. This time it was Bob Cohen, Mindy McConnell, and Father Portacomaro. It was nothing official, but these three seemed to have become, by default, the main think-tank for the whole business. CNN had in fact designated Mindy lead investigator to the mystery for the network's interests, and Cohen was, well, just Cohen. The priest wasn't really given any official diocesan duties for the event since no Catholic church buildings had disappeared. But the bishop was savvy enough and sufficiently aware of what was happening to call Father Frank and ask him to stay close and keep him informed. He thought to himself*, seems I'm Catholic liaison to the Protestant Crisis,* and found that slightly humorous. In this coffee meeting this morning, he noted that neither Cohen nor McConnell seemed sympathetic to the thing but were both very interested, for professional reasons. He shook his head, *maybe they're here for a reason, Lord.*

Each ordered their preferred beverage and sat down together.

Cohen began. "So where are we?"

McConnell took it. "We've got eighteen disappeared and we know evangelical Protestant church buildings plus two synagogues, which is interesting because they each seem to be . . ." She paused. "They each are called by some Messianic



synagogues." Cohen's eyebrow went up but Father Portacomaro was expressionless. "That means they believe in Jesus even though they're Jewish," Mindy added.

Cohen said, "What?" He had never heard the term Messianic synagogue, although he certainly knew that some Jews believe in Jesus.

Mindy continued, "I have been talking to one of the synagogue members and while I wouldn't call her a source, she seems important to me for some reason."

The priest took it up from there. "Then we have the governor who went to one of the sites and got her hand burned from touching the soil down in the hole."

Cohen added, "Then, *wham!* We have an Air Force helicopter crash right at one of the holes."

The priest then added, "And while this may not be at the top of the list of incredible things, we have a community of Christians getting together and helping each other. Not that this never happens but it is extraordinary right now."

Cohen said, "I know I'm not looked at as a warm-hearted journalist, but I'm not blind. And I see that happening too, Frank. I don't know if it'll last but it's kind of neat to see it right now."

"Why does it always take a crisis for people to get together?" asked McConnell.

And the little conference went on for two hours.

* * * * *

At the same time Jim Pappas and Karen Asnat were spending more time together, talking about the soil mystery. And they had the shared experience, which they were still processing, of seeing and communicating with an angel. Each wondered if somehow they had imagined it, hallucinated it, or been subjected to some other scenario. And each time they talked about it, they had to agree again—no, it was real. As real as anything either of them had ever experienced. It had shaken them, especially Karen, considering the prediction that she would understand more about

the hole mystery after studying the soil. This threw her. She thought*, how can I understand more when there are things in the soil which even chemistry cannot identify?*

The two were sitting in Pappas' office. He looked at her and out of nowhere said, "Karen, would you like to have dinner with me tonight? I can cook us up some spaghetti and we can have a salad and I can pick up some garlic bread." He really didn't know why he asked her. He really didn't have any romantic notions, but the two of them seemed to share something now, and it seemed like a reasonable idea.

Karen was embarrassed. She wasn't very experienced in the social world. She wasn't naive either, but she didn't go out a lot. Her first reaction was, "Sure," and she smiled and said, "Why not? What time and where? Shall I go to the store?"

Jim replied, "I live in Vista Linda Apartments on Entrada de Milagro. I'll text you the address. How about six o'clock? And yeah, why don't you bring the salad?"

She said, "That's fine. I'm not good at the social scene Jim, but this thing we have experienced together, well, maybe we need to stick together until we see where this whole thing is going? And besides, I appreciate not being alone right now. I'll see you at six." She got up from behind the table, smiled again, and headed out.

At that moment, Jim's cell went off and he smiled back, waved goodbye, then answered the call. It was Governor Grimley.

32

Karen knocked at Pappas' door which he answered and welcomed her in. "I just got standard mixed salad fixings, I hope that's okay," she said.

"Hey, I'm glad you're here, and thanks, that will be great," he replied. "I was thinking, I hope you don't think I've got ulterior motives with this. We both gotta eat, right?"

She chuckled and said, "No, I didn't think that. And yes, I'm hungry. Dealing with building evaporations, helicopter crashes, and angelic apparitions gives one an appetite."



They arranged his dining room table. Earlier he had bought a bouquet of flowers for the table and had some water boiling for the spaghetti. He was a nerd and proud of it, he decided, and maybe she was one too. Awkwardness, or *inconcinnus* in Latin, was the dictum. He decided to relax and enjoy this evening for what it was.

She asked him for a salad bowl, and she assembled a nice salad and placed it on the table. He presented boiled spaghetti noodles, a bowl of sauce, and a plate with sliced garlic bread.

Then he said, "Oh man. You know my friend used to tell me to never serve spaghetti to a date."

"Is that what this is?" she asked, with a mock-quizzical look on her face.

Now Pappas was embarrassed. "No, I dunno. But my friend meant that when you're feeling nervous with someone spaghetti is not the thing to serve."

She laughed, "Why not, everyone likes spaghetti?"

"Yeah, but how do you eat it gracefully?" and they both laughed.

She said, "So let's not look at each other while we eat it."

At that very moment, a strand with sauce fell on his shirt and he quickly tried to recover. They both laughed so hard they almost cried. Red wine accompanied the dinner, then they cleaned up and had some gourmet ice cream for dessert. Karen had noticed that Pappas had almost a whole wall of DVDs which included several *Star Trek* seasons. She asked him, "So you're a Trekkie?"

"What nerd isn't?" he answered. "I especially enjoy the first season of the first series. Want to watch one?"

"Sure," she said. "You pick."

He was gleeful, pulled the slip case from the shelf and fingered through the disks, scanning the episodes, which were all familiar, until he came to one. He didn't know

why it came to his mind, but he said, “This is called “The Devil in the Dark,” one of my favorites.” Then he caught himself. “Wait. Are you, uh, squeamish? I wouldn’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“I’m not a novice, although I don’t know episode titles. My Dad loved *Star Trek.* ‘That isn’t logical, Jim,’” she mimicked Mr. Spock and tried to raise an eyebrow, though she couldn’t do it very well.

“Sit back there in the good chair, and I’ll put the disk in,” he said.

In the episode, The USS *Enterprise* arrives at the pergium mining colony on planet Janus VI to help the colony deal with an unknown creature that has killed fifty miners and engineers and destroyed equipment with a strong corrosive substance. The use of the corrosive substance was described in a very meticulous way. As they watched the fifty-minute episode unfold, which featured a creature called a Horta, Karen and Jim both got quiet. At the closing credits, Jim shut off the television and sat down on the couch.

“Uh. That was something, thank you. I enjoyed that,” Karen said. “But what is pergium?” she asked. Jim remained quiet, thinking. She took out her phone, Googled it, and read out loud. “Pergium is a substance mined in Episode 25 of the first season of the original series of *Star Trek* entitled, “The Devil in the Dark,” and fictionally given the atomic number 112 as a chemical element in a non-canon *Star Trek* medical manual publication.”

Then he said, “The Horta tunneled, using a strongly corrosive secretion. But it was no devil but a noble and highly intelligent silicon-based creature. We’re carbon-based creatures.”

“Speak for yourself,” she joked, but she was following him. “Jim did you pick that episode with some purpose in mind?”

He thought and answered, “I did not, it’s just an exciting one. In fact, I worried that the guys getting fried would upset you. But I didn’t think about it before I started looking through the episodes. It just caught my eye.”



She looked at the floor then said, “There are some parallels here, don’t you think? Corrosive substance, tunneling creature, intelligent. A moving story and the tunnels were bored very quickly. I don’t know, it feels familiar . . . I’m sorry, but . . .”

“No, I get it.” He looked around and privately wondered if some angel was orchestrating things. She laughed and looked too, in a kind of faux dramatic fashion. Then she got serious.

She went on, “You see, the tests that were done, you said that there was some stuff in the corrosive at the hole which they could not identify.”

He frowned and said, “Karen, you think a Horta did this?” which made her laugh, yet again. They both knew the laughter was a way of letting off steam. The last two weeks had certainly been tops on the Weird List for both of them.

She came back, “Horta is sci-fi Jim. But we are not dealing with sci-fi. We are dealing with sci-real-plus bizarre,” and was proud of herself for making up a new term. She stood up and then said, “I’ve got an article to edit tonight and an early meeting tomorrow. I’d better get home. But I’ll say this . . .”

Jim stood up too, disappointed but didn’t want to show it. “What’s that?” he said and smiled.

“You and I have some things to think about. Next time, I’ll do dinner and it won’t be anything awkward.” He looked down at his shirt.

He laughed one more time, gave her a quick, gentlemanly hug and opened the door for her. She gave him a quick peck on the cheek, thanked him for the evening, went out to her car while he watched her. The evening was over, but the whole saga was only beginning.

## 33

Governor Grimley’s hand was healing, the pastors were talking and praying together often, Fathers Portacomaro and Clark went about their normal duties, and regularly helping some Protestant church gatherings as often as they could. Cohen and McConnell were grousing around trying to dig further into what had become a

big story. But everyone had hit a wall. There was only so much to learn. The governor had spoken with Pappas to see what results the chemical analyses had turned up but was only mildly attentive that "superacid" was about it. It didn't register as significant to her that there were other unidentified compounds present in the soil. She was happy to live with *we just don't know some stuff*, and after the bandage had been removed from her hand, turned away from Santa Fe itself, to her wider regular agenda.

The Air Force had thoroughly grilled its Air Guard pilot and his flight engineer as to the chopper crash, satisfied themselves that it wasn't their fault, flat-bed trucked off the Pave Low, and chalked it all up to some unusual weather event. *C'est la vie*.

There were twenty unexplained caverns in the ground around Santa Fe with some very strange details accompanying them, and a consistency between those details, but since there were no deaths, and also no answers, the city started to ignore them. In fact, two real estate firms had made gentle inquiries into whether those church bodies might be interested in selling their properties. No one was. And finally, no longer was anyone talking about unusual odors at the sites—a detail that had been forgotten. That is, except by Jim Pappas.

He was in his office, doing HPD work, his heart and mind both only half engaged. He was watchful of himself *not* to look distracted, but his boss noticed his loss of what had been an edgy and energetic attitude about the work of historic preservation. Pappas used to blurt out things like, "We can't let these damned developers ruin this site!" Or, "If we're out of money this year, we gotta borrow from next year!" Now, while he continued to work on his project assignments responsibly enough, this man seemed elsewhere—all the time.

Around lunch time he went over to the lunchroom, pulled out a peanut butter sandwich and a plastic bear-bottle of honey and squeezed some out on the peanut butter. Then, a very unexpected thing began to happen. He started to weep. Not a slobbery, wailing kind of weeping. Tears flowing down his cheeks in buckets. He looked at the bottle. It was standard grocery store variety. He smelled it. No smell. But he couldn't stop the flow of tears because he was inexplicably happy. He had no idea why and he slipped the sandwich back into the baggie, put it back in the paper bag, threw it on his desk and quickly walked to the men's room. He looked in the mirror and thought to himself, "Jimmy boy, you've flipped now," which only



made him laugh out loud and more tears came. He was there in the men's room, looking into the mirror, feeling really, really wonderful, when his cell phone chirped. He looked at it and it said *Karen.* Not really knowing why, he quickly answered it and burst into laughter. But . . . she was laughing too.

"Jim, did someone slip us some happy juice?" He laughed. But he was also rational.

Between guffaws he calmed himself. "Karen, I am so glad you called. Did you eat any honey today?" Then he thought, *have I lost my mind?*

"I dunno. Let me think . . . Yes, I did. I had some on a waffle this morning. Are you laughing right now?" she asked.

"I am and I don't know why. I put some honey from a bottle on my peanut butter sandwich and then started . . ." Laughter overtook him again. Now they were both laughing through their cell phones at each other and thankfully no one saw them experience an unmistakable feeling of great joy.

"I'm glad those reporters aren't around right now. They would report us to the Major League New Mexico Looney Bin Police," and they both kept laughing, now having trouble breathing. "Can we meet after work?"

"Yes," he said, "and you better bring me something really depressing or my sides will split open. How about at Brew—five thirty?"

"Sure, and the idea of your sides splitting open is gross and not funny," and she actually fell out of her office chair, onto the floor, laughing. "Later . . .," and threw her cell phone up onto the desk.

* * * * *

Rosaria Moniz and Sophia Menendez were sitting over tea in Sophia's kitchen. Their friendship over the past two weeks had deepened, but without any reason other

than the shared experience that they, their husbands, and their congregations were sharing. Their discussion ranged from “what are we going to do?” to “maybe all this attention has a spiritual reason,” to “our husbands need us to be steady.”

“So how are you actually doing, Ro?” Sophia asked.

“Same today as yesterday,” Rosaria replied. “But you know, I haven’t told Victor this, but I am not depressed. For some strange reason, I am happy and I can’t tell you why. We all lost our buildings, and our Sundays have been odd and exhausting with worshipping with a bunch of new people, you know what I mean?”

Sophia looked at her for a moment and said, “Me too, Ro. We should be all *triste y depremida* but we are not.” Rosaria chuckled because she knew that Sophia was not actually Hispanic but from Wisconsin. “Why are we not bummed out? I’ve been trying to figure that out. In fact, in the middle of the night I am lying there laughing and trying not to wake up Stephen. Why do I have this feeling of . . . joy? Is that what it is?”

“Yes,” Rosaria said, “Let’s pray about this for a minute,” which seemed abrupt but altogether appropriate. She began. “Lord Jesus, as we think about where You are right now, we thank you that we can come to you at any time. You know we have been waiting on You in this time. You know that all our churches, and our husbands are in the dark about why this thing has happened. But you are the Light of the World and we rejoice . . .” She stopped.

“Yes,” Sophia took it up, “We rejoice.” And they both had tears of joy on their cheeks. “We rejoice in You and we know You are in control and that You have some purpose in this loss we’re all struggling with.”

Rosaria continued, “And Lord, all these people are watching us. Maybe You have caused this somehow and You have some greater purpose happening. May we be obedient as we wait on You, and would you encourage Victor and Stephen?”



Sophia added, “And Lord Jesus we don’t understand why we should be feeling this joy. But we are feeling it and maybe we’re getting a clearer vision of heaven somehow. Lord, I like feeling good and yet I grieve for our people. They worked hard to raise our buildings. Have Your will be done and use Rosaria and me to honor you in this. I thank You for my friend, my husband, and the flocks that they’ve been called to. Help us be led by You, in Your name, Amen.”

Rosaria finished too, “In Your mighty name, Amen.” They looked at each other, sat back in their chairs and sighed.

## 34

The State Police Dodge RAM parked in front of the coffee shop and the trooper entered and ordered a medium house blend. Although he didn’t know it, New Mexico State Police Trooper Avon Duvall was the only individual who had visited all twenty holes in Santa Fe. Federal officials, state officials, the Air Force, CNN, and anyone else who had interest in the investigation had all had their fill of looking down into square, rectangular, trapezoidal, and oval holes, seeing the same thing in each—which was basically nothing—shrugging and going back to their jobs. Each site still had yellow tape staked around the hole because of the fear of chemical burn from the soil, but it was no longer a big deal. No one wanted to get burned anyway, it seemed. After two and a half weeks, the cynical catchphrase in Santa Fe had become, “Nothing to see here, move along.”

In Alamos Brew he scanned the store and saw two people that he recognized sitting together and chatting. It was Jim Pappas and Karen Asnat. Trooper Duvall was good with names. He wandered over to them and Pappas stood up.

“Trooper, good evening,” Pappas said.

“Yes, good evening, sir, Mr. Pappas, isn’t it?” answered Duvall.

“Yes sir, and this is Ms. Asnat,” who smiled in return.

“Right, I remember. How are you two this evening?” he asked.

“We are fine, thank you. On patrol tonight?” Pappas inquired.

“On my shift, right. May I sit for a moment?” he said.

“Yes, please, trooper, we would love for you to,” offered Karen.

Duvall made himself comfortable and took a sip of the coffee. He took the lid off and blew across it, then chortled, “I’ve always wondered if the coffee is always hot here because we’re only thirty-five miles from Los Alamos?”

Karen looked inadvertently at her cup and Pappas said, “Right. Do you have a Geiger counter in your vehicle?”

The trooper smiled and said, “No, back at the station.” Karen relaxed, then he said, “This is not an official deposition but can I ask you two something?”

“Sure, go ahead. We’ve only got about two hundred questions ourselves about these last few weeks,” said Pappas.

Duvall began, “There seems to be no answers to why and how all that’s happened, did happen. But one thing I have noticed is that the church people, including the priests, have been connecting and uh . . . what do you call it . . . cooperating a lot. The news hasn’t said much about that, but I am seeing it all the time. If this had been twenty manufacturing sites, or twenty convenience stores, or twenty fast food restaurants, the people would have little in common.”

Pappas thought and then said, “I’m not a big churchy guy but there does seem to be a common interest between church people.” Karen said nothing.

Duvall went on, “Right. What is that? Just, they all go to church?”

Pappas was quickly moving to uncomfortable ground, out of his sphere or realm or expertise, or whatever. “Hmm, ya know trooper, I’m going to guess that it’s their faith.”



“I’ve got you, Mr. Pappas. That’s my point. There were no disappearing Catholic churches, or anyone other types of buildings. All the churches, except the synagogues—and what, by the way, is up with that? —are fundamentalist or uh, yeah, most of these pastors are not real down with that word. What is the word they use?”

“Conservative is the word they’re comfortable with,” offered Karen.

“Yeah, but there’s another word too. Not one I ever heard before,” Duvall went on.

Pappas added, “Right. Evangelical.”

The trooper raised an eyebrow. “Uh, you mean like Billy Graham?”

Pappas was acquainted with enough history to know that evangelical was not the same as evangelist and said that to the trooper.

Pappas took it further. “The disappeared churches seem to share more than an uptight fundamentalist attitude. They are similar in their view of history, and stuff. They have a common opinion about theology and the Bible. That’s what makes them different from the Catholic churches and all the others who didn’t see their buildings vanish.”

Karen added, “Then what about my synagogue, Jim? We’re not Christian, we’re Jewish. Why did we lose our buildings?”

“That’s still a mystery to me,” Pappas said.

The state trooper wasn’t done yet. He said, “So let’s say this theology Bible stuff is what unites them, so what? It was the church buildings that disappeared. Why the buildings? There’s no common opinion in building materials, right?” and he laughed.

Karen then said quietly, “Avon, I believe in Jesus. I am a Jew. I’ve been in Temple Beit Lehem for a long time but I believe in Jesus. I don’t know *why* I believe in Jesus, but when I was with my former boyfriend, we talked a lot about Jesus and well,

now I believe in him. And there's something else, trooper. Jim and I think we saw an angel."

Jim moved in his chair and looked away. The state trooper looked at her, said nothing, but strangely did not react. After a few seconds he said, "Why am I not surprised to hear you say that?"

Pappas felt a surge of courage or honesty or something. He then agreed. "We did. We thought we were nuts, we thought about hallucinations, maybe we were drugged somehow, or exhausted, or there was some other plausible explanation. But we are now convinced it was real—there you have it. Maybe that's off the record though," he said hopefully.

Duvall held his cup tightly now. Its remaining heat didn't seem to matter. "Have you shared this with anyone else?" he asked.

"We have not," said Karen, and then laughed. "Can you imagine the response we would get? And do you know what? Whose business is that anyway, even if it is real? We're not going to set up a T-shirt business and sell tickets," and then all three had a good laugh.

At that point, the trooper's shoulder radio queried him and he got up and went to the other side of the coffee shop.

Jim looked at Karen and she looked back at him. "We're in the doo-doo now. You just outed us to a state trooper. White jacket patrol might be on the way as we speak."

Karen smiled then said, "Right. But somehow, I think it's fine. I'm sure he's not a rookie at hearing interesting things. And I feel safe with him. I don't know, Jim, it just came out. I feel like we were going to end up telling someone one of these days."

He reached over and placed his hand on hers. She pulled hers back, he said, "I'm sorry," and then she reached back and placed hers in his. The trooper came back.



"Okay good citizens, I just got a call. See you again maybe. But your secret is safe with me." He winked and fluttered his hands as he walked out.

Pappas smirked and said, "Never trust a trooper who flies on angel wings."

A tension had broken and Jim found he was still holding Karen's hand. She seemed embarrassed but a warm happiness was in her heart.

35

Bob Cohen was drinking his fourth beer. It was, after all, a Saturday night, he was alone and hey, that's why beer was invented—to get you *drunkified,* an old Navy expression. He was done posting news items for the night.

He had his Netflix on and was flipping through the seemingly endless choices of movies and shows—then stopped on *Star Trek*, considered *Voyager* and then said to himself through the Michelob haze, "I'm in the mood for an original." He clicked—then laughed, "People always say clicked but there's really no click." He selected the original series, Episode 25, "The Devil in the Dark." The pergium mining colony on planet Janus VI.

36

The pastors were emotionally powering up for Sunday morning, the third in the new normal routine of no buildings of their own. Pastor Menendez was going to preach in the combined Santa Fe Christian Assembly/New Beginnings Fellowship service, again to be held outside as the weather was going to be fine. Pastor Steve's mind drifted to a silly question, *what if Vic and I merged our churches? What would we call ourselves? Santa Fe Beginnings Assembly? New Christian Assembly? Or invent a brand-new name, Whole Holes Community Church?* He looked around, embarrassed that he thought of something so stupid. But smiled. The Lord had given him stranger ideas.

One of the common things the eighteen churches had happening was that their trustees—they didn't all have the same name for this function, but all the churches had some board that took care of their buildings, from maintenance to cleaning to budgeting, improvements, upgrading equipment, infrastructure—had little to do.

And now, in the third week of all this, some of them were looking for things to do in order to help their congregations. In two of the churches these trustees had met together with a team of helpers often called deacons. And as for helping people, there was a never-ending list of things that people needed. Visits, financial assistance, finding professional services like counseling and interventions, childcare, providing rides, and other needs. These deacons were more than willing to enfold some of their trustees.

Pastor Steve's cell chirped and he saw that the call was from one of his trustees, David D'Angelo. "Yeah Dave, good evening. What can I do for you?"

"Hi Pastor, look I'm sorry to disturb you tonight but a quick question. The Christian Assembly trustees asked to meet with our trustees tomorrow after we have our service. I'm not sure what they want, but I thought I would run it by you. Would that be okay?" D'Angelo said.

"I don't see why not, Dave, let me know afterwards what's on their minds," Menendez answered.

"Thanks, I'm praying for your message—these are important messages I think, pastor. See you in the morning," and he ended the call.

Steve wondered what was up, then spent some time praying, asking again, for the thousandth time over these last three weeks, "Lord, what are you doing here in Santa Fe? What are you doing in *my* life? Use me with this message, I pray. For Your glory and for Christ's sake, Amen." Then he went to bed. Sophie was already asleep.



37

The e-mails came first because those addresses still existed. Each pastor and rabbi of the twenty religious Santa Fe organizations received an e-mail from the United States Internal Revenue Service. The first e-mail was cordial, almost sleepy sounding, and went like this:

Your Internal Revenue Service wishes to extend its warm and heartfelt regrets for the unsolved disappearance of your organization's physical facility, which has been documented by local, state, and national news reports and confirmed by local IRS agents in New Mexico. We are sure you will understand the propriety of revenue and financial taxation policy changes which naturally must occur with each shift in the national growth, and with regional and local alterations which occur for individual religious organizations. Since your congregation no longer possesses an actual physical facility, and since it has not, as of this date, filed IRS FORM 555.111E9 for EXTENSION OF TAX-EXEMPT STATUS DURING EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES, it seems likely, and it is therefore assumed, that your congregation, as an ongoing and current organization has chosen to also cease to exist.

Accordingly, the IRS, as of a date three months from the date of this communication, informs you that your tax exemption 601e4 status will be revoked and your organization will be assessed an annual taxation remittance if you wish to continue your registered status with all the commensurate protections and privileges.

In addition, Environmental Protection Agency penalties for ownership of a hazardous site will be assessed soon and you will be contacted with any penalties due.

Sincerely,
Francis Xappa, Esq.
Supervisory Revenue Officer
Southwest Center
Ogden, Utah

cc
Governor's Office, State of New Mexico
New Mexico Department of the Environment
New Mexico Department of Health
State Board of Finance, New Mexico
State Police of New Mexico
New Mexico Lottery
New Mexico Indian Affairs Department
Base Commander, Kirtland Air Force Base

Victor stood up and stepped back from his computer.

Stephen stared at his phone, fumbled it, and dropped it into the toilet.

Randy held his iPad and threw it onto the coffee table, and then picked it up again and forwarded the e-mail to his wife and chairman of the elders of his church.

Charles immediately hit print and snapped up the page from the printer.

All the men who had received this e-mail were stunned, but each had his own personal reaction too. It was shocking news, very confusing and each man took about thirty seconds to feel his shock turn to anger. Pastor Moniz collected himself and called Pastor Menendez.

“Steve, did you get this IRS e-mail?” he yelled into the cell phone.

“Yeah, I did,” came back Menendez. “I don’t know what to say. I’m blown away by this. What the heck is going on?”

“We better get in touch with everybody, and let’s call Cohen too and meet and compare notes,” Moniz said.

“I’m with you. You call the first nine and I’ll do the second nine,” Menendez suggested.

“Fine,” said Moniz. “How about Santa Maria tonight at seven o’clock? I was going over to see Frank anyway. I’ll call him and ask if we can all meet there, I’m sure he’ll be fine with it especially when he hears what it’s about.”

“Got it. Call me if there’s any change, and Vic let’s be praying about this,” Steve said.

“Yes, you’re so right. You’re always quicker on the prayer draw than I am,” and Moniz ended the call. He sat down, looked out the window and said, “Lord, what are you doing?”





At seven o’clock, most of the churches were represented at the impromptu meeting at Santa Maria Chapel. Father Portacomaro stood outside the main door, greeting and welcoming them into the chapel. He was starting to feel like one of them since they had met together several times now. His friend, Father Marty Clark was there in his familiar back-up role to his colleague, although he was very sympathetic to the Protestants’ situation. Neither Portacomaro nor Clark had any idea what this latest meeting was about.

Moniz walked up to the priests, shook their hands, and thanked them again for their hospitality. He immediately showed the priests a copy of the e-mail. They read it, each with a look of surprise on their faces.

Frank said to Marty, “Have you heard about this at all?”

Clark shook his head, “I haven’t. Why would the IRS target these churches when they’re down on their luck? Frankly, I think it’s outrageous.”

The people were coming inside and getting seated in the old pews. There wasn’t really anyone in charge of this new fellowship, but Victor Moniz took the lead again for the gathering. Not really having a clear idea what they were going to do, he stood up and after a very quick poll learned that all of the churches that had lost their buildings had received the same e-mail. There was real agitation in the air, but a feeling of camaraderie between them, too.

“Why do I sorta feel like the Jewish leaders when the Nazis started rounding them up?” asked Pastor Randy Juarez, and glanced over at Rafael Donner, Cantor from Shalom Congregation, who nodded in agreement.
Moniz said, “Brothers and sisters, let’s have a word of prayer tonight, shall we?” Everyone agreed. He asked Stephen Menendez to pray.

“Lord Jesus, we invite You through Your Spirit, to be with us here this evening. We are thankful for the confidence that we all have that You are not only in control of what is happening, but that You have a plan too. Calm our hearts and guide our words. We know we are not the first of your servants to feel pressure. But we do not know why we are being targeted right now. Give us wisdom and patience and

most of all help us Lord, weak as we are, to honor Your name and be good witnesses for You, in Your holy name, Amen." There followed the unifying sound of "amen," even from the priests.

Pastor Moniz had collected himself and before the meeting threw together a semblance of a brief agenda and made copies on his home printer. He knew this would give the meeting a sense of order.

Cavern Fellowships
7 PM
Opening prayer
Introductions
Status of Sunday worship gatherings
IRS e-mail
Suggestion to form a leadership team
Sharing of needs
Closing prayer time

"Cavern Fellowships," read one of the pastors. "That feels right. None of us have buildings anymore but we all have caverns."

"This doesn't seem like it's going away anytime soon," added Menendez. "It won't hurt us to organize a little bit, especially since now we have a new challenge facing us."

Moniz had them all give their names once again and indicate their respective churches. Then he invited discussion about how their Sunday services were going. The priests sat on the side and observed.

Pastor Whittier spoke and shared that he was amazed that his church and The King is Coming Church were enjoying each other's company, as they met together at the Mariah plant. His colleague, Pastor Juarez added, "Yes we are finding more in common than we would have guessed just a few weeks ago."

One of the two Southern Baptist pastors spoke about a joint effort to reach out to the first responder community in Santa Fe. They had put together a mission plan to bless the nurses, city police, fire department and the State Police in any way they



could. Already they had sponsored a Saturday campaign to visit each fire company and police station with a banner and gift certificates to Taco Bueno which were all happily accepted.

Karen Asnat and her friend Manya and Cantor Donner were last to speak in this section of the meeting. Karen said, "Friends, somehow, I feel privileged to be going through this with you. I also believe in Jesus, and Manya and Mr. Donner do too. We are careful to speak of this openly in our synagogues but here, tonight, we want you to know that there are many within our congregations who have come to believe in *Meshiach Jesus.* Actually, with the disappearance of our buildings along with yours we feel like we are part of something new."

Bob Cohen was there and up until now had been quiet. Those around him heard him mumble, "I knew it."

Bruce Philipsburg, who had taken on a sort of pop-hero status, stood, and commented on the e-mail that Menendez had called and read to him. "Folks, I want to suggest that we defer conversation about the IRS e-mail until a later meeting. We all know what it threatens us with, and we need to not move hastily. I think the idea of a team or committee or something is a good one and important. I believe the Lord will lead us, and I think we should appoint a group to include one person from each fellowship to serve on this committee. It doesn't have to be the pastors, but it should have a few pastors on it. We commission the group, and we let them get together. We can all work together for communication and support in the meantime."

*No one could see it, but Screegion was hovering about ten feet from Philipsburg and began to move closer, an evil smirk across its visage. Also unseen to anyone was the sudden blazing appearance in the spirit realm of Kuriosagapa who intervened in front of and about three feet over Philipsburg. He uttered no words but just stared at Screegion, whose pinions covered him, then he green-poofed away.*

Moniz asked if the people agreed with Philipsburg's direction and all did.

Then Moniz moved that the meeting transition into a few minutes for people to share any needs. There were several, and Moniz asked with each one, who could

work on helping to meet the need? With each one, someone volunteered. Then they shared an open prayer time, which lasted about fifteen minutes.

Moniz advised they would close the meeting and take volunteers to serve on a team. He began writing down names, e-mail addresses, and cell numbers for those he did not know yet. Karen Asnat offered to serve for her congregation and to assist Moniz in any way he might need help. Rafael Donner offered to represent for Shalom Congregation. Twenty-two people were now a team, and they all agreed to speak only discreetly about the new Caverns Fellowship and to make prayer a major effort for this new group.

39

Karen was reading her New Testament this morning. She didn't do that every morning, but she found herself doing it today. One verse seemed illuminated to her thinking—it was in the book of John. She recalled that her one-time boyfriend had said he really loved that book of the New Testament. She had no clue yet how or why someone would love one book over another, but she remembered the book of John was special for him. So now, she made her way to that writing and what people called verses 31 and 32 of the 8th chapter. She felt almost as if a flashlight were shining on those words. They read,

> "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"

Karen was taken by the words "set you free." *From what?* she thought. *Sin? Oppression? Bondage? Annoying people? Guilt?* She didn't know. But she liked how it sounded. She also noticed to whom Jesus was speaking: "to the Jews who believed him." Huh. There were people right there, when Jesus was in front of them, who were Jewish. And they believed in Jesus. I think I would have been one of them. Lots of others did not believe in Jesus, and she remembered many from her own upbringing that if the name Jesus ever came up, which it rarely did, they would scowl or shake their heads or change the subject. She remembered reading in the book of John too, somewhere, about that woman who was Samaritan, kind of half-Jewish, and the compelling and rather odd conversation Jesus had with her.



Karen didn't feel Jesus' part in the story was strange but she found the woman only half got it. But she, the woman, was intrigued at least.

Then Karen remembered what the angel had said to her and Jim. "The mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust." *What an odd thing to say, O angel,* she thought.

"I think you were real and Jim does too, but why couldn't you tell us what in the world is going on?" She repeated his words back to herself again, "the mystery unfolds with light. What is light? What light? Did you mean like how I'm feeling this morning with this line in John? Is how I'm feeling light?" "And what mystery?" she wondered aloud, "The disappearing buildings or something more?"

Karen was a reflective sort. That's what made her good at her job. She paid attention to details. She understood protocols and design. But these past few weeks had been the greatest challenge to her hungry-for-understanding mind that she had ever experienced. She decided to call Jim.

It was a weekday and each was working, so she chose to text him instead: **Hi Jim. Can we get together soon? I want to process something with you.**

Ten minutes later her phone blipped with a text message which was Jim responding: **I'm in Albuquerque for the day. Be back about 6. Want to get dinner?**

She typed back: **Sure. That would be good. How about Palachio?**

Jim replied: **Sounds great. I will be ready for some Mexican. 6:30?**

She replied: **Looking forward to it.**

40

Bob Cohen was brooding. Something in his head told him that Karen Asnat was not supposed to believe in Jesus. "That little public confession was bullshit," he said to himself. She was Jewish, supposedly, and therefore to go around saying you believe in Jesus, was just wrong. He was in his RV and talking to himself, he realized. "She's a phony and it bothers me," he said quietly, to no one. "Hey, I was raised Jewish,

and I'm not trying to get people to fawn over me," he said, again, to no one. He got up, got another beer from his fridge, and sat down again.

But admittedly, he had no explanation for why two Jewish synagogues had slid into the abyss. That was no scam, no grandstanding. Neither synagogue had any connection with any of the churches, and their properties were as cleanly devoid of structures as were the eighteen churches. For a moment, back three weeks ago he had let slip, in Mindy McConnell's presence that he wondered if this was some huge, clever publicity stunt. McConnell had said nothing and glared at him in that moment, and if looks could roast, he would have been toast. He surmised she said nothing because it was a preposterous theory. He himself abandoned it just as fast as he had dribbled it out.

He decided to call the Good Father. He hit the cell for Frank Portacomaro's number, absent-mindedly not thinking about the priest's mass schedule. But Frank answered, "Yes, Bob, good evening."

"Hi Reverend," Cohen began, "I gotta ask you something."

"Shoot," said the priest.

"Doesn't it strike you as a little convenient for that Jewish woman, um, Asnat, to announce so dramatically that she now believes in Jesus Christ? I mean, don't get me wrong, people can believe whatever the heck they want, I could care less, but coming from a synagogue it seems kinda phony to me," Cohen said.

Portacomaro asked, "Is this line of inquiry for Santa Fe Day or for your own interest?"

Cohen laughed and thought, *fair point*, and said, "No Reverend, I'm not going to post anything about her—McConnell would fry me if I did—but I wanted your professional assessment."

"Bob, one can never be too careful you know. It isn't the sort of thing we see every day but there have certainly been high-profile conversions between the faiths. People renounce Christ, become Jews or Muslims, and then we read about it in the media. I read last month about a big-time cult leader leaving his cult and getting all



this press for his announcement of becoming Hindu. It happens. There's no reason it can't happen Jew-to-Christian, in fact that seems kind of natural to me," the priest opined.

"Yeah Reverend, but Jews aren't supposed to do that," Cohen objected but then realized how elitist that sounded.

"We don't see it every day but it does happen. I need to be careful here," the priest coughed, "especially with a journalist, but there are whole Jewish congregations that call themselves Messianic because they believe that Jesus of Nazareth *was* their Messiah. They're not in every town or city but there are quite a few of them across the nation, and from what I hear, the number is on the rise. I don't know of any joining up with *my* faith, but they're sincere and sometimes come into some trouble because of it. I guess what I'm saying, Bob, is that they see themselves with a continuity that is sort of noble."

"I don't get it," Cohen said. "Why not renounce their Judaism and simply become Christian churches? Who would care? Why still call themselves synagogues?"

Portacomaro thought for a minute. He sensed that this was an important call he had received, and he wanted to speak carefully. "Bob, they're still Jewish. They're not renouncing their heritage or their identity as Jews. They've come to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Sure, there's a long-standing tradition, with teeth in it I think, to flatly reject Jesus for his claims and what the Church has said about him. The rabbis I have known are always careful not to criticize the Church even if there are some black marks of antisemitism in our history. Jewish leaders don't usually go there. So anyway, I think the two synagogues that lost their buildings ought to receive the same sympathy as the eighteen churches, and Ms. Asnat has shown some real courage, as has the cantor from the other synagogue. Why not talk to them?" the priest probed.

Bob thought about that. "Reverend, all I know is my rabbi told me all the time, 'Robert don't be such a yutz,' and that was for stupid stuff. I can't imagine what he would do if I started saying 'I believe in Jesus.'"

* * * * *

Karen Asnat and Jim Pappas met that evening at Palachio Café on Palace Avenue just after six thirty. Normally the restaurant closed at four o'clock, but recently began offering Friday and Saturday dinner hours. Jim called their dinner menu historically unprecedented, which was funny because it was the same as the lunch menu. He ordered the chicken enchilada plate, she ordered the veggie enchilada plate, with sour cream, and they each had a beer.

He relaxed with Karen and they enjoyed their dinner. He didn't press for why she had called him and knew she would get around to it.

"Jim, I know you're not a Bible scholar or anything but I wanted to tell you about this verse I was reading. I am still thinking about . . .," she looked over her shoulder and lowered her voice, ". . . what the angel said to us. Do you remember what he said?"

"Of course, I do. He said a bunch of things. I was mesmerized. I don't recall everything he said but he talked about another angel or something named Michael and he seemed to know about the letter you received," Pappas replied.

Karen said, "Yes, and then he quoted one thing in the letter, the line was 'the mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust.'"

"Uh huh, I remember that. I haven't a clue what it means, and if I ever imagined angels to speak cryptically, that moment sure confirmed it," Jim said.

Karen laughed, then she went on. "I was reading this piece of the Gospel of John this morning and my mind was focused on this . . ." She had written the words on a three-by-five card and handed it to Pappas. He quietly read it out loud, "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"

He looked at her. Then he said, "That's you, isn't it?"

She was amazed at how quickly he read her feelings. She didn't say anything. So he went on, after looking at the card again. "What truth do you think this is referring to, and what will it set you free from?"



Karen hesitated, "I don't know Jim, but my heart is so full. I don't know, I *feel* these words. They feel like they're speaking to me," and her eyes misted up.

He looked at her, thinking she was not prone to drama, then said, "You know, Karen, I believe you." He looked at the card again, moving it from hand to hand. "It's like for you, a Jewish person, who says you now believe in Jesus. This was written for people like you."

"I think so," she said. "I don't mean to make a federal case out of it . . ."

"I work for the state, not the feds," and they both smiled.

"But this is powerful to me," she went on. "Something is going on, and we all know that, but for me, this is personal. There I was going about my business as an editor, spending time at my synagogue every week, enjoying my friends. But now it's like I am in a new chapter of my life."

"Me too, Karen," and again he took her hand in his. "Somehow, we're in this together, and I'm glad you called me."

* * * * *

Out of curiosity, State Trooper Avon Duvall drove by the New Beginnings hole. The yellow tape was still staked around the cavern and it looked undisturbed. He had requisitioned a TruPulse 360 Laser Rangefinder from the public works department, to take some measurements of a church hole or two, as he told the DPW clerk. It wasn't the kind of equipment state police troopers were accustomed to requisitioning, but nothing else in this Santa Fe saga was customary either so the clerk shrugged, had him sign for it, and handed Trooper Duvall the case. The piece of equipment had a range of 2,000 meters with an accuracy of plus-or-minus 8 inches. *Close enough for government work,* Duvall thought. It was a little thing, weighing only ten ounces, but it worked beautifully for what Duvall had in mind.

The New Beginnings facility was an L-shaped building with a long wing, the worship space, and an office/meeting room on a short wing. There was also a basement which while unusual in New Mexico, was not unheard of for public buildings. He was curious about the dimensions of the holes. He aimed the rangefinder and quickly got the cut lengths, a term which he made up himself and was proud of it,

wrote them down in a notebook, and then aimed the device towards the floor of the hole. The long wing was 30.48 meters long by 12.192 wide, and the short wing was 18.288 meters by 9.144.  There had been a canopy/drive-through, which measured 6.096 meters by 6.0696. The cavern included where the canopy had been.

"The TruPulse says," Duvall smirked with a Barney Fife-like official tone, "12.192 meters in depth." The rangefinder was capable of calculating volume, then he saw that the rangefinder had a conversion button to feet. He converted all the numbers. The cavern was 4,247.52699 cubic meters in volume which was exactly 150,000 cubic feet of space.

He glanced also at the spot where the helicopter had crashed, and there was a small scar or indentation there, too. For a moment, he thought about measuring it, but the wind had begun to obscure it so he didn't. He also dismissed the idea thinking that it had nothing to do with the church anyway.

Then he decided, just for kicks, to drive over to Siler Road, about five miles away where Christian Assembly had been and do the same measurements. He went through the measuring litany again. Christian Assembly was a different shape than New Beginnings but Duvall almost fell over when he did the calculations. Christian Assembly's volume . . . exactly 150,000 cubic feet of space. This church's hole was exactly the same volume as that of New Beginnings although its depth and area were different.

41

The equivalency of volume between the church hole at Christian Assembly and the one at New Beginnings really got Duvall's attention. *Coincidence,* he thought? But he drove to another church site and found the same thing. And another, and another. Measuring all twenty holes took him the better part of the day, which happened to be a day off for him. None of the church footprints were identical. So Duvall checked the dimensions of each from his little notebook and quickly saw that the variable was the depth. *Why,* he thought to himself, *would what is left behind be the same, being set by a varying depth?*



The calculations were tricky for a couple of the churches, even with the rangefinder. The Pentecostal church trapezoidal in shape, and the other was oval-shaped. He had to calculate the simple area formulas for each of those shapes. Diameters, some trigonometry, and he got them. Yup. Same volumes for every disappeared facility: 150,000 cubic feet.

In the case of a couple of the larger church footprints, the depths were much less—one was only eight feet down. He didn't know why no one else had noticed this or mentioned it. He thought that he would sit on this revelation, but then thought that if shared carefully with another official person, it might help to have more than one head pondering this new mystery.

"Who should I let in on this?" he asked himself. "The state official seems logical," and he looked at his cell and found the entry for Jim Pappas, Historic Preservation Division of the Department of Cultural Affairs. He didn't know or remember what exactly Pappas did for the HPD of the DCA, but he seemed like a stable guy. He tapped on the entry.

Right away, it was answered. "Yes, Trooper Duvall, good evening."

"Hello Mr. Pappas. How are you tonight?" he asked.

"I'm well, and to what do I owe this call from another esteemed New Mexico employee?" asked Pappas, in good humor.

"Mr. Pappas, you were the one I thought I would call, or tell, at this point. I have discovered a detail in the disappeared churches mystery that I don't think anyone else has thought about yet. I thought I would run it by you first, and get your reaction," the trooper explained.

"Avon, what do you have?" asked Pappas.

"Out of curiosity I took some measurements with a laser rangefinder of one site. Then I figured the size of its hole from the dimensions. Then again, out of curiosity, with no rational reason to do this, it occurred to me to do this at a second site. The volume of its hole, although its lateral dimensions were different, was the same. Exactly the same. 150,000 cubic feet," Duvall said.

“Wow, that’s interesting,” responded Pappas, sitting up in the couch now at his apartment.

“That’s not the real kicker, though,” Duvall went on. “The thing is, I spent the day going to every one of the twenty sites. The size of the hole left at each site is exactly 150,000 cubic feet. The depth of each site is the variable, you understand, and the outer footprint of each hole is different for each church. To get the same displacement, the depths vary. You follow me?” Duvall slowed up.

Pappas was really interested now. He said, “I’m with you, and . . . fascinating. Thanks for calling me first. I feel privileged, but what do you think it means? And what do we do with this information?”

Duvall said, “Let’s sit on it overnight. Not tell anyone right away. I want to re-run the measuring of a couple of the places early tomorrow morning before my shift, then I’ll call you later in the day.”

“We’re not going to divulge this little gem yet, right?” asked Pappas.

“Right. Not yet. It’s got to mean something, but I wanted to let someone else know in case, I dunno, I disappear tonight or something,” and awkwardly laughed.

Silence from Pappas’s cell. Then, “Keep your powder dry, trooper and call me tomorrow. Don’t disappear please.”

Then the state trooper laughed an easier laugh, and replied, “Roger that HPD command, Duvall out.” And he disconnected, feeling silly for sounding more military than he was.

42

If the general public seemed to have become somewhat apathetic with twenty local religious congregations that lost their buildings, with no answers discoverable for why, the pastoral guild was not. They met for prayer, collaborated on joint services, and endured what was clearly the strangest experience any of them had ever been faced with. Even the two Catholic priests remained sympathetic and helpful, now a



month into the saga. Those guys, though suffering no loss themselves, were paying attention.

Fathers Portacomaro and Clark had become closer in their friendship because of the frequency of getting together, albeit on the sidelines, but watching and praying in their own way for the Protestants. Father Frank continued to receive text messages and a few visits from Santa Fe Day journalist, Bob Cohen. The priest had also let it slip to the blogger/reporter that the churches had been put on notice from the IRS, via their pastors, about a pending loss of their tax-exempt status. This interested Cohen. He in turn, had shared it with the CNN reporter who also found it intriguing. She had put in a call to Attorney Xappa, the regional IRS officer who wrote the e-mail, but got nowhere. “He’s not in this week. Please send us an official media information request,” and other typically bureaucratic gobbledygook that made it clear she was going to get no explanations from him.

Mindy McConnell thought she would try the New Mexico governor’s office. The e-mail remarked that her office had been copied. She drove over to her office, which was easy since it was right there in Santa Fe. With her CNN badge around her neck, she walked into the governor’s office suite, introduced herself to the security guard, and then to the first receptionist. “The governor is out of state today Ms. McConnell,” she was told, “But leave your card and I will ask her to call you when she returns.”

Mindy snuffed at the news and went back to her van. She sipped her latte and thought that this was too strange a development, that there should be someone she could get to for an answer.

Then she remembered her uncle in Washington, DC who was an FBI investigator. She chortled, to herself. “Man, if I could get Uncle Ken interested in this . . .”

* * * * *

At the Southwest Evangelical Free Church hole, a single woman sat in the dirt, looking down into the chasm that was her church. She was alone, and the sun was setting. No one was around except her. She was weeping, quietly. Her name was Maegan Grimley and she was an architect. She had been chief architect in the

design and construction of this church six years before. Her mother is the governor of New Mexico.

* * * * *

*One of Screegion's underlings was floating around the house of Bruce Philipsburg. It had been assigned watch-duty. If this demon had a name, no one knew it or cared. It just worked for Screegion. The demon peered at the house, and almost with a premonition knew that Philipsburg was going to come out of it and go to his car. It waited. Sure enough, Philipsburg, the pilot, came out and hopped into his car. The demon reflexively did something towards Philipsburg. It was a sort of combination belch, spit, sneeze, flatulence-blast, coughing, scream all at once. It hated Philipsburg, Screegion, its own long history and pretty much any and everything on this wretched planet.*

Philipsburg didn't notice the demonic bird-flip-like outburst and just hit his key switch. Smoke began to emerge from under Philipsburg's car dashboard and he blurted, "What the heck?"

*At that moment, the demon found itself faced with a bright, glaring, white-hot and unspeaking visage which made it flee in terror—a dirty green "Pfft" in the spirit world marked its exit.*

Philipsburg quickly jumped out of the vehicle but then the smoke dissipated. He looked around, stuck his head back into the car, and bent down under the dash and could see box-like component that still had a wisp of smoke coming out of it. It had marked on the casing, AUXILIARY CABIN AIR FILTER, and had a simple plug-in connector, which the pilot unplugged, shrugged, threw it on the driver-side floor and went on to do his errand. The car started up just fine this time. No smoke.

43

Maegan Grimley was sitting in her mother's kitchen, drinking iced tea. She was pensive and her mom knew why. "Ma," she said, "that church was art, you know. My art! And *wham*, it's just gone. They didn't have all that much money which really moved me to do my best to create an efficient and yet a beautiful space for a good price."



The governor rubbed her hand, absent-mindedly and said, "Many are hurt by this thing, Maegan. It is such a strange thing and, in these times, New Mexico doesn't need a national-focus mystery, and I don't need the whole country looking at us with a jaundiced eye."

Maegan wasn't hearing the political angle which is where her mom's thinking was. She went on, "I remember a story of this incredible Renaissance-like church in Chile that was supposedly beyond belief in church majesty. And then this earthquake happened and it collapsed. But at least they could pick through the rubble and recover some of the art and building materials to rebuild." Her mother was looking out the window, only half hearing her daughter.

Lucy spoke, "And now I learn that the IRS is going to revoke the tax-exempt status of all these churches because there are no longer congregations meeting at their addresses. Can you believe that?"

Maegan was looking out the window too, and only half-hearing her mother. It was like two separate conversations about the same subject. Then she looked at her mother, "Wait. What?"

Lucy turned her gaze back on Maegan, "Um, yeah. Each of the pastors of the churches and two leaders at the two synagogues got a letter. I was copied on it too. The IRS has decided that since the church buildings are gone, the churches don't qualify for their tax-exempt status anymore. Which makes no sense whatsoever. I am not a church person, as you know Maegan, but something is wrong there." She had no idea what an Evangelical Free Church was and didn't much care, other than her daughter was a member of that church and had designed their building, or rather, former building.

Now Maegan was giving her mother her full attention. "How can they do that? A congregation isn't defined by its facility. What about all the 601e4 organizations around the country that do not *own* their own facilities? Why does the IRS want to kick our churches in the . . . head . . . when they're down? Do they think losing a facility, especially to an as yet undefined cause, especially a whole bunch of them at once, especially all in one city, is some kind of tax evasion conspiracy? This is insane!"

The governor/mom was now feeling her daughter's exasperation. In all that was going on, the fact that Maegan would feel all of it very deeply and personally was a thing that kept slipping away from her. She said, "Look darling, I'm going to investigate this. You're right, there is no sense in this and if there's one thing that gets me going it is an injustice. And between you and me, this seems like a first-class, bold-ass, capital "I" injustice and somehow these churches deserve my protection."

Maegan barked out a laugh and said, "Do *not* mess with the Lady Governor Boudica of Santa Fe!" And they both laughed, iced tea dribbling down their chins.

44

It was a strange thing. Jim Pappas did not usually remember his dreams. And if he did, he did not remember *any* being in color. But as he crawled, almost fell out of bed, the dream that had concluded was as clear as if he were still asleep dreaming it. And it was in color.

* * * * *

Karen was at her little kitchen table, fresh coffee in front of her, and her Bible was open. It was a King James Bible but she vaguely remembered the words she was reading from her upbringing. She was reading the prophecy of Joel—יוֹאֵל in Hebrew. She had no idea how old this prophet was but knew he was in the readings used in the synagogues she was part of when she was young. She read in the second chapter,

> And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.

She had no idea what all these things meant, just that the context seemed to be about something called "the day of the Lord." She noticed a tiny little letter next to the end of the verse. It referenced Acts 2:17, so Karen turned to the New Testament where she knew the Book of Acts was found. She turned to 2:17 which read,



> And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

"Huh," Karen mumbled, "That sure sounds like the same thing." She was an editor and her natural response was to write each verse, next to each other in her journal and compare them.

| | |
|---|---|
| And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. | And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. |

The two sentences were similar but not exactly the same. She saw that the Acts verse was part of the transcript of a speech that Peter had given after the little tongues of fire had appeared over the heads of the men, earlier. He seemed to be explaining to people watching what this meant, from an ancient prophet. She said to herself, "Wow, this is heavy." She wondered what *prophesy* meant, what stuff young men would see in visions, and what stuff old men would see in dreams? She also wondered what women and men the Bible was talking about, when these things would happen, and what distinguished old men from young men.

* * * * *

Pappas put his pants on and sat on the side of his bed, mentally inventorying the things he had just dreamed. He was in a room. In his dream the room smelled like plaster and paint, very new. It was bright with what he thought to be morning sunlight. There were conduits above his head, which was strange, he thought, to see that in a dream. There were benches in a circle, which was also strange in his dream consciousness, because vaguely he thought, *benches are always straight.* He was in that room, walking around, and the more he walked the room seemed to go on and on. Then, there was something like music, but nothing like he had ever heard. It was, in fact, better than anything he had ever heard. It was beautiful melodies, streaming around all together and at once, but not out of sync with each other. The sound wasn't only harmonious. He heard himself say, "It is better than

harmony" and, in the dream, he laughed, which made him laugh more because he was conscious enough in the dream to also think to himself, *I've never laughed in a dream before.* Then for some reason, he turned. He had been alone. Now he sensed, he was not. As he turned, he was confronted by another smiling figure, tall, majestic. It was an angel. It was Kuriosagapa, towering over him who said, quietly and happily, "Hail James, son of Andrew and Susana."

As he remembered all these details, tears came down his eyes and he made his way to his living room where he took a pen and notebook and wrote it all down. Then, without even thinking much about it, he called Karen Asnat. He had no idea what time it was.

* * * * *

Karen looked at her chirping cell and answered it. "Good morning, Jim, a little early for a Saturday, no?"

"Is it?" he said. He looked at the cell itself, which told him it was 6:22 a.m. "Um, yeah, I'm sorry. I guess it is. I'm sorry. I didn't realize what time it is. I just woke up. Uh, Karen, I had the wildest dream, and I almost never remember my dreams. Can we get coffee, I mean, whoa, I'm sorry, you probably have stuff to do."

Karen startled herself with his mention of a dream and knocked over her cup of coffee. She laughed, really a lot louder than she usually would and said, "Yes Jim, especially since I just tipped over my coffee cup here. How about in an hour at Alamos Brew?"

"That would be good, see you in an hour," and threw his cell on the table. He then tripped on the leg of his pants and fell flat on his face.

45

Karen was sitting in the coffee shop, a steaming cup of house blend in front of her when Jim walked in. They smiled and waved at each other, then Jim ordered himself an iced coffee, then sat down across from Karen who immediately said, "Yow, you have an ouchie on your chin. What did you do?"



"Just as I hung up with you, I fell flat on my face," he said. He rubbed his chin; it still hurt and a bruise was forming. They sipped their coffee and she smiled and said, "What's going on?" He liked her smile. Somehow it warmed his heart.

"Uh, this dream. I had to tell someone. I wrote it down but it blew me away so much that I had to share it." He turned red. "You were the first person I thought of." She smiled again but then her look turned concerned.

"Why? Was the dream upsetting?" she asked.

"Well . . . let me tell you, yeah, it was upsetting but, man! So, I was in this room and walked around and it kept getting bigger. Weird, eh? And I couldn't get to the end of it. And it smelled new, like someone had just finished it. And it was in color. I almost never have, or remember at least, color dreams." Jim stopped. He didn't really want to tell her the upsetting part.

Karen took it up, "Huh. Interesting. And?"

Pappas spontaneously took her hand, which she looked down at and now, for the third time, smiled. She said, "You seem to like my hands."

He withdrew it, and she immediately grabbed it back, with both of her hands. "Go on," she said but he withdrew it again.

"You're going to think I'm going crazy, but hey, maybe I'm not," he continued.

Raising her voice, she said, "Go on. You're making *me* crazy."

"Uh . . ." and he looked down into his coffee. He didn't want to see her expression for what came next. "There was this kind of music, which was beautiful and strange, like, I don't know. It's hard to describe. It was really complicated but not frustrating at all. It was just beautiful. In the dream it put tears in my eyes."

Karen looked deeply into those eyes.

He went on, “I had thought I was alone in the dream, in the room, you know? And I was. I think. But then I sensed someone was there with me, like you’re startled because you become aware someone is behind you? You know?” Karen was silent.

Jim looked at her now, not afraid. “And I turned. And . . .”

She looked at him intently.

“Uh. And there he was,” he added.

There was no change of expression on Karen’s face. She was waiting, but she asked, “There who was?”

Jim looked around. They were at a corner table with the nearest other patrons maybe ten feet away. “The angel. That same angel.”

Now Karen’s expression changed and she grabbed his hand again but said nothing.

Jim went on, “And Karen, he spoke to me. In the dream. He said, ‘Hail James, son of Andrew and Susana.” Strange feelings flooded that moment. Tears came down his cheeks. She held his hand tighter. And tears came down her cheeks too. They looked away, then at their coffees, then again at each other. He said, “Am I crazy? Is my subconscious barfing up a huge hairball. Is this nuts?”

A moment passed as she thought. Then she said, “Jim, when you called, I was reading a place in the Bible. It mentioned dreams, two places actually. It so startled me that I knocked over my coffee cup. I’m reading about people having dreams and you call at what, 6:15 or something, and you just woke up from a powerful dream? Coincidence? Random?”

He looked at her. “Show me the place in the Bible.” It just happened that, in fact, she had put her Bible in her bag as she left her place. She pulled it out, all King James smelling, she thought. She opened to the prophecy of Joel and showed him the verse. Then she showed him the little cross-reference to the Book of Acts and showed him that verse. “See?” she said.



He looked at the two verses for a while, first in Joel, then in Acts, then back to Joel, then back to Acts. “They’re not exactly the same but it seems clear. Who is speaking in the New Testament verse?”

“Peter,” she said.

“Yeah, Peter. Seems like he is deliberately quoting Joel. Man . . . cool. But I wonder when this thing ‘the day of the Lord’ is? And Peter seems to tag that day with ‘the day of the Lord.’”

She was now looking at the verse in Acts with Jim. They sat for a while, chatting, not mentioning the angel in the dream, just working through the Joel-prophecy and the Peter-exposition of it. In his head, Jim thought, *this is one of the nicest moments in my whole life.*

* * * * *

Meagan Grimley was an architect. She was not a forensic scientist. She was not a cop. She was not even a reader of mysteries. She loved design and designing. And she was a believer in Jesus. She had joined her church a while back and when it came time to build, happily volunteered her services to design their new facility. They paid her what they could, far below market value for an architect’s services, but Maegan had the kind of personality that when she offered something you knew it was sincere.

Her church was blessed and she was blessed. She took great joy in weaving together the facility needs of her congregation, thinking through the options of design, drawing up a proposal, presenting beautiful plans on vellum attached to foam core boards to the church’s building committee, helping them raise money, collaborating on construction, and then celebrating its dedication and launch. Now it was gone. Rudely, just gone.

She stood again at the edge of the hole, looking down. She looked up at the bright sky, looked around—only her there. And she prayed, “Lord Jesus why did this happen? How did this happen? What are we going to do?” Even while praying, she itemized the curious features of the hole.

- Crisp cuts into the dirt; the building was not demolished with explosives or excavated by machinery; no excavator could cut so cleanly. It was done with artful surgical precision.
- The corrosive nature of the soil – which seemed to be fading now.
- The faint smell like honey that some, not all, thought they detected.
- The equivalence of volume of holes between all twenty disappearances exactly synchronizing with the varying footprints of each building.
- It looked like each building had been beamed out, like in *Star Trek*, but she shook her head with that stupid thought.

She was glad she was alone and *especially* glad that her mom was not around. It all seemed so incredibly deliberate. All the aspects were too precise to *not* be connected. She asked herself, like an analyst, *what transports or destroys a building cleanly, leaves a corrosive residue, leaves a nice smell and does it repeatedly with the exact same result, and does it all in one night?*

Then Maegan laughed, looked around, and yelled out, "The starship *Enterprise* of course!" She laughed loudly, enjoying her own moment of supreme stupidness. But then she shook her head and thought, *not even the Enterprise could produce twenty transporter beams all at once.* She looked at her hands and said, "Idiot. Quit imagining crazy stuff."

She sat down on the dirt. She kept looking at the chasm that used to be a work of her art.

46

Mindy McConnell squeezed off five rounds from her Beretta 9mm Compact 3 and then hit the RETRIEVE of her target to check the grouping. Mindy didn't tell too many people that she enjoyed shooting. The target came back on the rail and she frowned. She was all over the place. Her weapon was small—a short barrel—but she thought she could have done better. She looked around from the stand, wondering if she had misjudged the wind conditions this morning. She was setting her target at fifty feet. It was a bright, sunny morning but gusts were not uncommon in Santa Fe nor at H&A Outfitters, which was used more by rifle and hunting enthusiasts than handgun practitioners. She ejected the magazine and



reloaded thirteen fresh 9mm rounds. She wore amber Peltor eye protection and Peltor Sport Digital headphones for her ears. The 9mm rounds made quite a boom.

Then, at the stand next to hers, Bob Cohen ambled up. He laid down his own gun bag and ammo supply, snuffed as he acknowledged Mindy and then smiled in his typical, half-smile/half-sneer way. She took off her headphones and gave him a snarky laugh back and then they both laughed. How random? Who would have thought these two, brought together by the strange holes-in-the-ground mystery, would find each other at a shooting range. He opened the dialogue.

"Great minds think alike?" he said.

"No, more like news people gotta watch their backs and keep their defensive skills sharp," she replied.

"Well, that makes some sense," he said. "What's your poison," he asked, gesturing at her handgun?

"Beretta Compact 3," she said. "It's a 92A1 and though it's not so good for any distance, it holds thirteen rounds and it feels comfortable in my hand. Kinda new, so I'm still getting used to it. How about you?"

Cohen played out the mystery as long as he could, unzipping the bag slowly, turning it around, zipping it back up, then unzipping it again. He slowly pulled out the plastic case that contained his handgun. He unclipped the case, and pulled out a Glock Gen 5 G19, which, after checking the weapon, handed it to her straight up. She took it, hefted it in her hand and handed it back. "Heavy," she said.

"Not as heavy as what I carried in the Navy. I love this gun and practice here as often as I can."

She nodded, and went back to her practicing, slipping her headphones back on. The two were the only shooters there now, so she glanced at him for permission to commence firing. He put his own headphones on, and nodded acknowledgement. She was shooting at a silhouette target of a bad guy, about fifty feet away. It was mounted on an auto-rail, unusual for an outside range. She squeezed off five more rounds in quick succession and then hit RETRIEVE once again. Her group of five holes

was tighter, but off to the left from the center of the target. She stared at the piece of paper.

After sending his target down a little further than Mindy's, he looked at her for an acknowledging nod, and squeezed off five rounds. She rolled her eyes because she could see that they were tightly grouped together and in the middle of the head of the target. He looked at her and smiled. She shrugged.

47

Several Cavern Fellowships were meeting each week. Some were people-grieving groups, which included people who needed to vent about the loss of their church buildings. These small groups had sprouted up and were usually populated by people from a single church. A couple of them had people from more than one fellowship. Their meetings generally consisted of discussions of various theories about what had happened, and what the future might hold. They also speculated together about what the meaning of a loss of tax-exempt status might mean?

It was a Wednesday night and one of these multi-church groups was gathered at the large Mariah Living Spaces facility, in which there was set up a nice room with tables and chairs and even a coffee bar. The people attending had been used to a Wednesday night Bible study and prayer meeting although this evening they were just being together. Some had coffee in front of them and all were friendly. Spontaneously, Charlie Ethan, who was pastor of the Southwest Evangelical Free Church, stood up before the twenty or so people there. He said, "Folks, there is no plan for tonight and I am glad to see you here. Some of you are from The King is Coming Church, a few from Every Nation, and a few from my church, Southwest EV Free. We want to be together for a little while, and we appreciate Mariah Living Spaces being so helpful to us. After some time of fellowship and talking, Pastor Randy and Pastor Bobby and I will lead us in a time of prayer together." He chuckled, but it wasn't because something was funny. They all were relaxed and sensed that these days were, for them, a time of waiting on God. It hurt, but it was good. In some sense, it is how believers are supposed to live. Ready, anticipating, humble.



But then something strange happened. Each table, led by one person or another—men or women—decided to spend some time together in prayer randomly. Chatting ceased but no one had instructed them to do this.

At one table was heard, "Lord Jesus, we thank you for all we have. We have our lives, our callings from you, the Holy Spirit, our Bibles, and each other. We have nothing to complain about."

At another table, one of the women prayed, "Heavenly Father, we praise you tonight for our faith that even though we have lost our buildings, we are trusting you. Do with us what you deem best."

Another praying person at another table, a teenaged boy, said, "For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone," which was a Bible quote from some place in the Old Testament. Voices at his table replied, "Amen . . . Yes, Lord . . . Amen." Bruce Philipsburg and his wife, Sarah, were the only people there that night from New Beginnings Fellowship and they were at that table. The tables prayed together for about an hour. No pastor got up or spoke except in participation at their respective tables.

*In the center of the room, as humans configure, hovered an invisible presence, four actually. Kuriosagapa and three other angels were watching and listening, motionless. They were not visible to the humans nor audible when they spoke amongst each other, although on this night, little angelic conversation was happening. It was like they were in a different dimension, but they were not. They were in this dimension, the purely spiritual realm. They were there watching, glancing outward and around often and yet incredibly relaxed. Each wore at their waists what to a human eye would have looked like a powerful broad sword, in scabbards. They seemed to be enjoying the gathering of this Cavern Fellowship. And in that hour a very faint aroma was drifting around among the humans. It also was not visible nor was it strong. It was only the most subtle wisp. Normally the Mariah Spaces building smelled of a typical industrial/construction nature from equipment and stores of building materials. But this evening there was none of that. The aroma was there instead and noticed by all but of which no one felt inclined to speak. It was oddly pleasant and pleasing to the people and some looked around absent-*

*mindedly to see if maybe someone had lit some incense or a candle. There were neither of those.*

*Kuriosagapa looked at one of the other angels and said, "These sons and daughters are precious, and they amaze me tonight." The other angel replied, "Yes, they seem to want to pray." Another added, "The King loves that." And from their wings wafted a delicate kind of smoke, wisps when they moved their wings. Their wings were not like earthy creatures' wings. They had no feathers but were strong, sinewy things. They didn't complement each other for such strength but appreciated each other's reflection of the strength of their Master. Kuriosagapa said and smiled, "I love to give watch over these subjects of our King." A few more wisps emanated from off his wings.*

Bruce nudged Sarah and whispered in her ear, "Do you smell anything unusual?"

She looked up, sniffed, and said to her husband, "No, not really." But she sniffed again, "I do kind of sense a nice honey-like presence. Kind of fragrant." It was as if there had been an aroma dispenser plugged into the wall, in a far room of the house. When you come in the front door you might catch a scent of it.

"Honey has no smell, does it?" he whispered again.

48

She was following other stories now. The Santa Fe holes-in-the-ground mystery, unsolved as it was, no longer held the status of hot news, and Mindy McConnell was seeking other stories and following other hints of news. But the holes-in-the-ground story, now referred to in her business as Hit-G, had not left her mind. Nor had it from Bob Cohen's either, although he had moved on. Bob and Mindy saw each other occasionally at the range, and shared the odd text message or e-mail, but it was purely professional and there was little warmth there. Yes, they both found themselves paired randomly collaborative way, because of Hit-G, but nothing other than that.

So how strange it was that the thought occurred to both of them, simultaneously, to swing by one of the Hit-G sites, on a lark. Even stranger that each decided to visit the same site.



* * * * *

Steve Menendez was again peeking at the 150,000 cubic foot hole in front of him. It was a cold and gray day but he squatted down at the edge, prayerfully remembering the building they once had. He recalled his little office, his library, the hallways, even the bathrooms, and finally what to him was a wonderfully designed sanctuary. It was not large or ostentatious in any way but to him it was a magnificent and well-thought-out tribute to the King (as he had liked to think of it.)

He was meeting Father Marty Clark for coffee, and he suggested that the priest first meet him at the hole. Father Marty, who had become his friend, was more than happy to do so. He pulled up to the site, got out of his car and strode over to the hole's edge.

Catholic priests are not like evangelical pastors. At such times, they say things completely differently than what evangelicals tend to say to each other. Father Marty was a younger man and had a pleasant demeanor. But he could also be cynical. He bent down next to Steve and greeted, "Your holiness," and smiled.

Steve snuffed, and answered, "Your grace."

They were not colleagues but they were equivalents. And the fact that they had become friends because of Hit-G seemed at once unlikely, random, and a pleasant surprise to each of them. They squatted there, Steve wondering where the honey-aroma had gone and chatting about the once-hopeful New Beginnings Christian Fellowship ministry. Clark had paid little attention to any of the Protestant churches or ministries in Santa Fe before the disappearances, but now had acquired a valuable familiarization with some of them and had been pleasantly surprised to learn of some commonalities between his heart for ministry and that of his new friend. They differed naturally on some significant points of doctrine and theology but thus far, none of that had come up. They had become friends out of their common humanity and compassion for the people who had lost their places of worship.

As they sat there, legs hanging over the edge and chatting, a dark green van was coming down the road and they glanced up at the sound of the approaching

vehicle. As it pulled into the lot and stopped, they each stood up. “Who might this be?” said Father Clark.

The door opened and out stepped Air Guard Lieutenant Bruce Philipsburg.

“What a pleasant surprise,” offered Pastor Steve, seeing one from his own congregation. “Do you know Father Marty Clark?”

Philipsburg answered, “I’ve seen you at one or two of the Cavern Fellowships, Father, but I am pleased to meet you. I know you’ve been very supportive to us and to my pastor these days.”

“A pleasure, sir,” said the priest.

“We’re heading to coffee Bruce, would you like to join us?” asked Steve.

“Oh, thank you Pastor, but I was stopping by to have a word of prayer about the future of our church. I do that here as often as I can, I don’t know why. God hears us everywhere I know, but I like to come by here,” said Bruce. “Any leads or answers yet, gentlemen?” and he laughed.

The pastor replied, “Nothing, Bruce. But I like to come by here too. And Marty—Father Marty—was meeting me here before we went to coffee.”

The priest said, “Marty is fine, my brother.” Bruce’s eyebrow raised at that.

At that moment, the sounds of other vehicles on the road wafted to them. To the east and still a mile away drove a Jeep. And as they all looked over to the west they noted another vehicle, this one black, coming at high speed. “He’s certainly in a hurry,” noted the priest.

The black full-size SUV ground to a halt and three men got out. They wore black masks and sported handguns. The three churchmen stood still, though Bruce instinctively squared his stance and planted his feet apart. He muttered to the clergymen, “This doesn’t look good.”

One of the three masked men, a short fellow, pointed what looked like a machine pistol at them and barked, “On the ground. Now.”

Steve and Bruce and Marty complied, slowly getting down on their stomachs and remaining still. They were completely puzzled as to what was happening. The three gunmen came over to the hole and surrounded them.

Steve said, “What do you want? You can have our money or cars but we don’t have anything else.”

The short fellow, apparently the leader, snarked, “We don’t want your money—we want him,” and kicked at Pastor Steve. “We’ve been watching you, preacher, and we knew you would probably come by here this morning.” He kicked him again. Bruce started to get up but one of the other fellows kicked him too. “Now stand up,” the leader commanded.

The three men got to their feet, frowns on their faces and stood still. The priest held up Pastor Steve who was hurting from the kick.

The other vehicle, the Jeep, then pulled in and Bruce said quietly, “What now?”

The three gunmen stood around their captives with weapons drawn, not expecting any other visitors. The Jeep came to a halt but no one got out. Its windows were darkened so the occupants could not be seen. Quiet rolled over the moment. No one moved.

49

McConnell heard the chirp of an incoming text on her phone. She took it even though she was driving.

It was from Cohen: **Come to New Beginnings right now.**

She was about a quarter of a mile away and accelerated on instinct. Part of her mind told her there was a new story taking shape, part told her Cohen must need her, as he wasn't generally so abrupt. And part was a vague sense of dread.

Approaching the New Beginnings site, she saw several vehicles and several men—some holding guns—and Cohen's Jeep. She did not see him. She felt no fear, yet she instinctively reached for her purse which she held. She pulled her car up behind the Jeep and shut off the motor. She pushed a loaded clip into the pistol and racked the slide. She did not get out but thought it more prudent to let whatever was unfolding, unfold a little more.

The three gunmen pushed their three captives together. The leader became angry and barked at Menendez, "Did you call the cavalry, preacher?" The other two masked companions held their weapons more closely, pointing back and forth at the captives and the Jeep.

Menendez, weakly said, "What is it you want? If it's me, I will go with you wherever. Just leave my friends. Please."

The leader yelled at the Jeep, "Get out of here, idiot, this has nothing to do with you!"

Then he grabbed Menendez by the neck and shoved him towards the SUV. The two other armed men covered his move towards the vehicle. Clark and Philipsburg stood still, until Philipsburg took a step towards them. One of the masked men then fired off a shot at him. It missed and the shooter looked at his weapon. "How could I have missed?" he said to the leader. Philipsburg hit the dirt and crab-walked quickly behind his own van. Clark did the same.

At that moment, the Jeep door opened and out stepped Bob Cohen, brandishing not a Glock but an IWI Zion 15 gun, technically a pistol but certainly looking like far more.

Mindy saw him, saw that he was armed, and got out of her car with her 921 held down to her side. She slowly came up beside Cohen. Two armed and very serious



looking journalists, she observed, but this was no time to dwell on irony. She decided to take her cue from Cohen for whatever was going to happen next.

The leader was not rattled. He had Menendez by the neck and stopped at the SUV. He said to all in a loud voice, "We're leaving and we're taking this preacher with us. You try to stop us, and he gets it. It's that simple. Got it?"

Cohen moved ever so slowly and carefully towards the SUV. He said, "Let's talk about this, Cisco. No one needs to get hurt today." His firearm was still pointed upwards. McConnell whispered, "Cisco?"

At that moment, the leader jabbed his handgun into the side of Menendez and pulled the trigger. The pastor crumpled; his neck released at the jolt of the round entering his abdomen.

Philipsburg came out from behind his van and tackled one of the other gunmen.

Cohen pointed his pistol at the other and squeezed off three rounds; the man fell.

McConnell aimed her 921 at the leader and pulled the trigger. The round went through his neck and he collapsed next to Menendez who was writhing on the ground.

Philipsburg was wrestling with the one he had tackled and Cohen quickly came up and aimed the barrel at his head. The man went still.

Clark came out from behind Philipsburg's van, down to Menendez and cradled the pastor in his arms. He was bleeding badly from his side. McConnell whipped out her cell and quickly called 911.

"Gunfire and wounded people at New Beginnings church on Old Pecos Trail, one of the Hit-G sites," she said to the 911 dispatcher.

"On our way," she heard.

* * * * *

New Mexico State Police Trooper Avon Duvall, in his RAM, was first on the scene, in four minutes. He had been on duty, heard the call, and floored it to get to New Beginnings. He was joined in another two minutes by an ambulance from Station 4 of the Santa Fe Fire Department and three city police cruisers, each with two officers. Duvall immediately recognized Cohen, McConnell, Father Clark, and Philipsburg. He called out, “Everyone drop your weapons now,” with which both Cohen and McConnell complied, not by dropping them but by laying them on the ground, raising their hands and stepping back. The city police officers apprehended them and immediately flex-tied their wrists.

Two EMTs quickly went to the wounded pastor’s aid, assessed his condition as grave, and worked to stop the bleeding. Clark had tears in his eyes but backed away. He was glad that his collar identified him as clergy.

The third gunman, the only one still alive, lay still and two other city officers flex-tied him, stood him up and assessed him as uninjured. They slowly and gingerly removed his mask. The other two gunmen lay dead on the ground, still wearing their masks.

Duvall looked for who to query and picked Philipsburg. “Lieutenant, right? Want to tell me what just went down?” His body camera was recording every word.

Bruce Philipsburg went into Air Force mode. “Officer, the wounded clergyman is Pastor Steve Menendez—he’s my pastor. The other pastor is Father Marty Clark. They were here together, praying I think, when I arrived. They’re good friends and I came by here too, to pray. We were not here long when that big SUV rolled in, and three men with masks confronted us and made us lie down. They said they intended to take Pastor Menendez captive; they didn’t say why. They kicked him twice, and me once,” he rubbed his side.

“One of them took a shot at me, which,” Philipsburg shook his head and looked up at the sky, “missed me.” He looked at Marty Clark and asked, “Father, what, he was six feet away? Anyway, you will find one round fired from that man’s handgun. Then, out of the blue, the Jeep and other car showed up, and that is Santa Fe Day correspondent Bob Cohen, former US Navy SEAL and CNN reporter Mindy McConnell. They each confronted the assailants with the intent, I think, of de-escalating or even disabling the capture. I don’t think they arrived together. The



short man who seemed to be the leader shot Pastor Menendez, and then he was shot himself. So was the other assailant. Ms. McConnell then called 911 and then you arrived. Everything happened so fast.”

Duvall looked at the IWI and the 921 on the ground, looped them each up with a hook off his belt so as not to touch them and placed them on the hood of his truck. He did the same with the other three weapons and then glanced at the SUV, wondering what evidence might be found there. That would be for the detectives.

He then called the incident in to his dispatcher and requested to be immediately joined by his watch chief. The city officers did not object and everybody turned their attention to the EMTs. They were readying Pastor Menendez for transport and were getting ready to depart.

Father Clark asked Duvall, “May I go with the ambulance, I am not a flight risk.” Duvall glanced at the city sergeant leading the police group. The sergeant nodded, and said, “Yes, Father please go, we know where to find you.” Menendez was now unconscious and haste was the need. The EMTs gently rolled the pastor onto a stretcher and into the ambulance and started off for the Level III trauma facility at CHRISTUS St. Vincent in downtown. One city police cruiser led the way.

Cohen and McConnell stood quietly together, next to one of the other cruisers. He said to her, “Damn girl, I hope you never get mad at me.”

Mindy looked at him, first with a blank stare, then a restrained laugh, then she began to cry.

Cohen said, “It’s not an easy thing Mindy. I know what you’re feeling.” He thought it would be best to shut up then.

Duvall said, “We’re going to need to transport you all to police headquarters downtown and get this all sorted out.” He was talking to everyone—Philipsburg, Cohen, McConnell, and the lone perp. “Sergeant, it’s your ball game. I’ll accompany you all there after I check in with my supervisor.”

Three of the four officers remaining at the scene gathered up the weapons, and one officer remained to wait for the detectives who would be arriving shortly. The perp was placed in one of the cruisers, and Philipsburg and McConnell in another, and Duvall would transport Cohen in the RAM.

Duvall said to Cohen, “If you will, please help me out by quietly waiting here next to my truck while I coordinate with my supervisor.” Cohen nodded in the affirmative and said, “To serve and protect, officer.”

Another State Police vehicle pulled into the lot and the senior officer got out and talked to Duvall. Then Duvall got Cohen settled in the back of his RAM, still flex-tied, and both state vehicles sped off. Interestingly, no one else had stopped out of concern or curiosity. All was quiet again but for the winter wind.

Barely forty minutes had passed since Pastor Menendez and Father Clark welcomed Bruce Philipsburg to their impromptu fellowship at the New Beginnings Hit-G site.





## 50

Pastor Menendez was in and out of consciousness after surgery, but he was alive. The assailant’s single 9mm round had pierced one kidney and nicked the other. It was not a straight 90-degree entrance wound but angled downward. He had lost a fair amount of blood. His wife Sophia was there, accompanied by Victor and Rosaria Moniz, Father Marty Clark, and an on-duty Santa Fe police officer.

Father Clark was concerned about the need for an officer outside the ICU and asked the city officer why he was there. “This is standard procedure with such a deliberate and premeditated act of violence,” the sergeant explained. That only dug at the deeper question—why would someone want to kidnap Pastor Stephen and then decide to shoot him?

Menendez was critical, but it seemed he would live because the EMTs did such a good job and transport to the trauma center was so rapid.

People from New Beginnings Fellowship, and others from the Cavern Fellowships, were coming by to check on the pastor’s condition. They were screened by Bruce Philipsburg and his wife, Sarah, then informed of the pastor’s status. They were both very tired by that evening, but vigilant to stay on duty. By eight o’clock, the stream of well-wishers and visitors dropped off and Bruce and Sarah collapsed in the waiting room themselves. Father Clark found them there, after making a coffee run. He handed them each a medium dark roast from Alamos Brew, and a bag containing a croissant and an apple fritter. Bruce and Sarah enjoyed every drop and every crumb. It would be a long night and they were ready for it. Neither had any intention of leaving the Menendezes or the Monizes. With so many watchdogs, and the police officer, Father Clark felt free to offer prayer and left for the night. Earlier that afternoon, he was debriefed by two detectives and gave a statement. He was exhausted.

* * * * *

*Kuriosagapa was nearby, watching, alone. It was not known by the humans if angels could feel or demonstrate emotions for their charges. But this one clearly felt for Lieutenant Philipsburg. He did not refer to him by his Air Force rank, instead*

*favoring the name, Sir Brix. He loved to think about and communicate with other angels concerning the path Sir Brix's faith had taken.*

* * * * *

Bob Cohen sat at police headquarters in one interview room with a detective, and Mindy McConnell was in another one with the detective's partner. The detectives developed an account of what had happened from each of them. The journalists were not allowed to talk to each other, and it was still being determined if they were to be arrested and charged.

The IWI Zion pistol, though evil looking, was fully legal and registered. McConnell's 921 was also legal and registered, though New Mexico law did not require registration at that time. The question was not ownership or carrying, it was the circumstances of the actual use of their weapons to lethal effect. Shell casings and the rounds in each of the dead men were recovered by the forensic team, the medical examiner, and the detectives. It appeared to be a clean shoot, said one of them to the other, while acknowledging it was still early in the investigation. Two alleged perps were dead, a local pastor was in critical condition, and a third perp was not talking and had lawyered up, awaiting a public defender's arrival to the police station.

Santa Fe Police Detective Brant Taylor knew of Bob Cohen. Not well but knowing he had honorably served as a Navy SEAL told him a lot. Taylor's partner, Sylvia Morrisette, was acquainted with Mindy McConnell.

Taylor brought Cohen a cup of coffee and they talked. Cohen came out with, "I know who the main bad guy is, or was. His name is Pablo Cisco. He was a low-level operative for the *Demônios Elevados*. They're a Brazilian drug cartel that has a couple of cells here in New Mexico."

Taylor responded, "Yeah, I've heard of the Lofty Demons. But they aren't known for arranging steals of pastors. They're usually more elegant in their operations. You say they wanted Pastor Menendez and then this Cisco just shot him. Many questions here, Cohen."



He went on, "And did he really need three rounds to the abdomen to take him down?"

Cohen looked carefully at the detective. "Did you notice their pieces, Detective? Each was sporting a Glock 18."

"Yeah, fully automatic. Some think it's the deadliest handgun on the planet," Taylor added.

"I can't say I—or we—and Ms. McConnell just showed up. I did text her and request her presence when I arrived and could see something bad was going down, but you will find on our phones that was a full four or five minutes before any shooting started. She was just there, and I had no idea that she was armed. But it was take out the man I shot or be taken out. Pure and simple. I would rather have had him living to interrogate, but he was drawing on others next, including me. I gave him three to end the event. I think you might have done the same, detective." Cohen was not cocky, but sure he was on high ground here.

"And Ms. McConnell put Cisco down, done. I mean just done. Personally, I would not have thought she had that kind of collected deliberation in her but then again, I guess she's seen a lot." Cohen was babbling now, and the stress was beginning to catch up with him.

Taylor backed away from the table, walked over to the door, leaned up against the wall to give Cohen the sense of some breathing room. "But why would Mr. Cisco want to kidnap the pastor?" he asked, dredging for an answer to the bigger question. "So, Bob, how did you happen to come upon this bad scene, this kidnapping? Were you on the inside of something and knew this was going to happen?"

Cohen laughed. "Right, because I am so into clandestine drug lord snatches of clergy, and I thought, hey, they're not paying me enough so I better break this up."

"Wise ass," sniffed Taylor.

"No, Detective," said Cohen, "This is a mystery to me, too, and I want to know where it leads. The fact that I know who the main shooter was ought to help you

get started. But I'm going to predict that you'll find it hard to ID Cisco. His prints may be in the system, but I'll bet you're going to struggle to verify his identity."

Taylor was silent.

"*Demônios Elevados* is very clever at masking their operatives," said Cohen.

"And you know this, how?" asked Taylor.

"About fifteen years ago we had an operation against them in Tijuana, and I met Cisco there. Nuff said. He blew a hole in the pastor but that is nothing compared to what I saw in Mexico. He is one dark fellow. Um, was. I don't regret Mindy taking him off the list."

Meanwhile, Detective Morrisette was trying to figure the way into McConnell's confidence. She believed it was a clean shoot and she appreciated the level of upset that she was seeing in this scrappy reporter. Mindy was still upset, kind of in shock. She wasn't crying, and she had not clammed up, but there was a deadness in her tone of voice as she recounted the events. Morrisette knew how to parry and thrust with her questioning, and then how to back away and wait. It was waiting time now.

51

The governor heard about the Old Pecos Trail incident from one of her assistants the morning after it happened. Since she lived and worked in Santa Fe, the news from that city got to her quickly. Two shooting deaths, and the shooting of a local pastor raised the news event to the top of her attention. She asked for a copy of the state police report from her assistant, who quickly got it off the secure state police server.

She learned that the report had been filed by Trooper Duvall, who she knew from visiting the Christian Assembly hole. She noted that the shooting victim was a good friend of the Christian Assembly pastor, and that both of them were friends of her daughter's pastor. She read that the three assailants were likely part of *Demônios Elevados*, and they allegedly had intended to kidnap the pastor who had been shot.



Though liberal to the point of legend, Governor Lucille Grimley hated the drug cartels and what they were doing to the citizens of New Mexico. Although the news media seemed to have moved on from the Hit-G mystery, she had not lost sight of the unsolved puzzle. She had been in one of those holes. She had the reminder of the burn on her hand, which remained red and was not healing. She recalled the press conferences in her head where she felt embarrassed at her lack of answers and had to keep hiding behind stupid expressions like, "it is being investigated by every resource at our disposal" and "while slow, our investigative process is advancing." She still felt her daughter's sadness at the disappearance of one of her proudest works of architecture. Now there were acts of violence involving several of the names with which she had become acquainted.

52

Governor Lucille Grimley had the fast track to quick communication with about anyone she wanted. Today she wanted to talk to Mindy McConnell from CNN, as she heard that McConnell was being interrogated for her role in the Old Pecos Trail violence. It wasn't completely unprecedented, but it was unusual for a New Mexico governor to walk into a police facility abruptly and request an interview with a current person of interest in some calamitous occurrence. It had been about 80 years since this had happened, back when New Mexico was still kind of the Badlands. The governor's SUV pulled up in front of Santa Fe Police HQ and Governor Grimley and two armed aides got out and strode into the building.

She was immediately recognized and greeted by the desk sergeant. "Sergeant, I wonder if I might get a few words with Ms. Mindy McConnell, whom I understand is being interviewed at this time," she said.

The sergeant nodded and called up to the area where McConnell and Bob Cohen were being held, or at least, being watched. Some might say being protected. The sergeant hung up and motioned to the governor and her aides to the area up the stairs and to the right.

"Thank you, sergeant," she said and asked her aides to remain there, while she went upstairs. "I'll think I'll be secure enough, gentlemen. Wait for me here please."

The governor walked the stairs and turned right where she found Detective Sylvia Morrisette waiting for her. The detective was unsettled at the visit and Governor Grimley could see that. She said, “Detective, relax please. I am interested in this situation because I am told there might be a link to *Demônios Elevados*. Plus, I am interested because of where this event occurred. I have an ongoing interest in the Hit-G investigations. I would like to chat with Ms. McConnell and Mr. Cohen. Could have a few moments with them? You’re welcome to join us. I wish no legal confusion.”

Like the desk sergeant, the detective gave no hesitation and replied, “Mr. Cohen is in the next interview room with Detective Taylor. Let me see if he can come in here now.” The governor nodded. “Madam Governor, can I get you a coffee or a water?” The governor said, “Oh my, detective, a water would be nice. Yes please.” The detective disappeared briefly and returned with a bottle of Crystal Springs water, handed it to the governor, and went into the next room. She returned with Mindy, went out again and quickly returned with Detective Taylor and Bob Cohen—all of whom were impressed with their visitor.

The detectives pulled out chairs for each journalist and for the governor and then receded to stand against the wall. The governor sat on one side of the table and Cohen and McConnell sat at each end of the table.

“Ms. McConnell and Mr. Cohen, I am Lucy Grimley. I understand that each of you has had a harrowing day. I read the state police initial report of what has happened to you both. I am sorry for the events in our city.”

Mindy was still shaken but had collected her reserve. Cohen showed a flat affect and nodded. The governor went on. “I am told that you each were involved with the discharge of your weapons in the incident, is that correct?”

Cohen offered, “Yes, Madam Governor, as we told the investigators, the officers who responded to the scene, and to these good detectives, we each felt compelled to fire at the assailants. Their pistols were trained on us and on the others present. We have no idea why this took place. And I have not been told the condition of the pastor.”



“Thank you, Mr. Cohen. Pastor Menendez is out of surgery and recovering. He is also under protection still and will remain so for the foreseeable future. That is partly why I wanted to speak to the two of you. Have you been able to imagine why he would be a target? I don’t know if you know this, but it has been part of my desire for our state to impede if not halt the market for narcotics that *Demônios Elevados* facilitates. And while I am not fan of firearms, I am glad you showed up to . . .” she chose her words carefully, “. . . to interfere. It is unfortunate that two of the three men were killed.” McConnell dropped her head, but then shook it off and looked up sternly once again at the governor. Cohen still wore no expression. “The third man is under the care of a public defender but I think he will share some pertinent information soon. While this was going on, did you get any notion of why this clergyman was targeted?”

This time McConnell spoke first. “Madam Governor, Mr. Cohen and myself, as we told the investigators—individually, I might add—had nothing more than a separate but distinct sense that we needed to go by the New Beginnings site. I have no idea why, but when I received a very brief text from Bob, um, Mr. Cohen, I hurried there. I was close anyway. The whole thing then went down very fast.”

Then Cohen spoke, “I knew the leader, Madam Governor. His name was Pablo Cisco and I had dealings with him while I was in the service, in Mexico long ago. He knew me as soon as he saw me and invited me to . . .,” then Cohen smiled very slightly, “. . . to scram. As Ms. McConnell said, I also had a sense to swing by New Beginnings, and I had been there before. It was the second site I visited on that strange Sunday morning. And when I arrived, the thing was already happening and I could tell it was not good. Any time firearms are being waved around you can usually assume there is danger. I stayed in my Jeep to figure it out and see if the situation would de-escalate on its own. Then Ms. McConnell came up behind me and well, things evolved from there. I do not know why that pastor was in their crosshairs, excuse me, was of interest to them. Except the way Mr. Cisco was so brutal to the pastor. That struck me as odd, like he knew him from before.”

“Interesting, Mr. Cohen, no one has suggested that yet, that I have heard anyway,” replied the governor. “Detectives, has the pastor regained consciousness yet? Has anyone been able to ask him or his wife any questions?”

Detective Morrisette answered first. “No ma’am. He is still sedated and I am not aware that anyone has taken the opportunity to question Mrs. Menendez yet. She has been so grief-stricken and surrounded by church people, I don’t think any of us has even thought of that yet. But we will.” Detective Taylor excused himself from the room, was gone about two minutes and then returned. He then spoke, “I have asked one of our other detectives to go to the hospital and speak to her briefly. He will text me before too long.”

The governor smirked and then went on. “I am informed, Ms. McConnell and Mr. Cohen, that no criminal charges are being set for either of you but that your safety is a concern. Once *Demônios Elevados* gets wind of what has happened to block what was almost certainly a kidnapping of their making, I fear you both are now targets. They have the reputation of being very vigilant for repercussions for anyone who gets in their way. They are particularly vicious.”

Mindy felt a contradictory rush of relief and fear. She had not been afraid at all during the altercation at New Beginnings, but now the adrenaline was gone and she was terrified of having to watch her back. She never felt so alone.

Cohen looked hard at the governor, trying to divine her agenda. Was she being sincere? Was she looking for an excuse to have their weapons permanently confiscated? Did she have something else going on? Before he could react to the governor’s statements, she went on. “I am going to request your release immediately. I know it is unusual for a governor to step in unannounced and throw her weight around, but after the police finish their protocols, and since no criminality is being looked at here—I believe the expression is a clean shoot—you will be free to go.” She then handed them two blank cards with a phone number but no other information. “I want you to call me directly if anything pertinent comes to mind, any contacts are made, or if I can help you in any way.”

Cohen’s eyebrow went up and McConnell now was the one with a flat affect. “Thank you, Madam Governor,” he said. “Yes, thank you,” replied McConnell.

Cohen reached, “Governor, I am surprised. You have made it plain that you are no enthusiast for guns. Are you going to release our weapons?”



Grimley laughed. “That is right, Mr. Cohen, no enthusiast, to say the least. But I am not stupid. After the ballistic information is gleaned from each, and this should not take long, your property will be returned to you both. Be extra careful, please, will you both?”

Now, for the first time in many hours, McConnell smiled. “I assure you, Madam Governor, we will be the soul of caution.”

The governor returned the smile. “Good, Ms. McConnell. And I mean it, call me with anything. This has been a strange few months and I am focused on it all for the good of the State of New Mexico.” Then they all shook hands and the governor left the room. The detectives sat down on either side of the table and the four of them looked down at the table for a moment. Only Cohen was unmoved but even he breathed out loudly.

Taylor spoke first, “Mr. Cohen and Ms. McConnell, that sort of made the path clear, don’t you think? I think the ballistic information about the event will be finalized very soon, and since there appear no ambiguities, you can retrieve your property shortly.” He looked at Morrisette and asked her, “Is there any further reason that you can see, Detective, to keep these two citizens here?”

“No, but as the governor made clear, I am worried for you both,” she said as she looked at the two journalists. “You could be in their sights as soon as you walk out of this building. As much as the demons may imagine you two are on to something, they are also very much about payback.”

“I appreciate your concern, Detective, but if we can process out, we would very much like to,” Cohen urged.

Taylor responded, “You can wait downstairs and when we are ready to release your weapons the desk sergeant will let you know. Shouldn’t be too long now. Maybe also though, don’t leave town right away. The governor doesn’t hand out her number casually. She may need you somehow, soon, too.” At that, McConnell sighed audibly. Taylor looked at her. “Stuff happens we didn’t sign up for sometimes, eh?” McConnell replied, “Yes indeed,” and went out the door, followed by the other three.

53

Pastor Steve's eyes opened and he exhaled a groan. His wife was dozing and immediately came awake and moved to his face. She spoke softly, "I'm here honey." Steve groaned again and blinked his eyes, trying to focus.

He croaked, "There you are, my Sophie . . . man I feel like *mierda* . . ." Sophie wept and held his hand and hugged his shoulder.

"You are alive my darling," she whispered to him. "The Lord has saved you. Many have been praying. And Victor and Rosaria have barely left this room. They're down in the cafeteria now. We have all been so worried."

A detective outside the room saw that Pastor Menendez was awake and quietly stepped in, introduced himself and showed his badge and ID, which Sophie looked at very closely. He asked Sophia, "Could I speak with you ma'am?"

She looked at her husband, nodded, and he nodded back, "I'll be right back," she whispered. They stepped outside the room. A uniformed officer was there and moved a ways down the hall.

"Yes, detective."

"Ma'am, I am sorry for what has happened and I want you to know that our department is doing everything we can think of to get to the bottom of the attack. We are somewhat mystified as to why a clergyman would be targeted for what appears to have been a planned kidnapping."

Sophia's face went dark, she looked away, then at the ceiling. But she was in no mood to be stealthy. She said, "I can tell you why, detective. My husband was not always a clergyman. These terrible men were from *Demônios Elevados*. Steve was in a rival gang about twenty years ago. They had . . . dealings. There was lots of money involved." She stopped. She wanted to be open but she also knew she had to be careful. "At one time there had been a heist, they called it a snatch. A bunch of drugs were stolen from the *Demônios* by gang members from Stephen's group. They hid it and the stash was never found."



The detective asked, "Drugs that are twenty years old would hardly have any potency or value today, no?"

Sophia sniffed. "Whether they do or don't doesn't matter, detective. The demons are very, *very* vindictive. It could be fifty years. And if they think my husband is vulnerable, they want to take him. They will often assign a kidnapping to *novatos*, um, initiates in the gang." Then she stopped and looked at the floor, "But this was Pablo. He was no *novato*. We used to get phone calls and now text messages. We have investigated it but the source phones were always burners, untraceable. Our church maintains a watch group and our leaders know from where Steve has come. We are very careful and completely law-abiding. Once, he tried to explain to the *Demônios* that his life had changed. They were uninterested, calling it religious crap. They just want to get at him. This is why we moved here from Texas."

The detective listened intently, but it was not an unusual tale. He asked, "Do your phones still have any of those texts on them?"

"No, we keep changing phones. A little expensive. But then time will pass and Steve will get another text. It had been a while this time. We do not doubt that they know our church and watch him." She opened her purse and the detective's eyes opened wider. He saw a Smith & Wesson Model 442 .38 caliber pistol. It said, *We the People* on it. His eyebrow involuntarily raised. "Don't worry detective, I am trained. And I visit the range regularly. But I have never shot anyone. Yet."

"Ma'am, I think that is wise especially with what you have told me. Here is my card and I want to re-emphasize that we want to protect you and your husband and if there is any lead that can provide for any higher ups in *Demônios Elevados*, we want to explore it. We are careful. And I am told the governor herself is very interested in progress with this group too. If that is any comfort."

They shook hands and Sophia Menendez went back to her chair next to her husband's bed. The detective left and things were back to status quo.

* * * * *

*By human measurements, about five feet up and five feet to the left, Screegion hung, invisibly. "Demônios Elevados indeed," it muttered, then snorted something black out of what looked like a nostril.*

54

Karen Asnat sat in the coffee shop, with her coffee, alone. She glanced at the condiments bar and got up and walked over to it. She picked up the Honeybear honey dispenser and took it back to her table. She set it down in the center and sat back down, staring at it.

Jim Pappas came into Brew at that moment, ordered a coffee and sat down with Karen. She picked up the honey dispenser and placed it under his nose. He recoiled first, then leaned forward to the top of the bear. He sniffed. Nothing.

"I don't smell much, Karen. I'm sorry. Do you?" He laughed as he said it. She ran it under her nose too and sniffed. Yup. Nothing. Honey doesn't put forth much of a fragrance.

"You might think that with all those bees around, smelling for flowers all over the place we, too, could smell it," she said. "That's another thing in all this mystery. Why did the people that were first at the church sites all remember smelling a pleasant fragrance of honey?"

Jim took the dispenser and squeezed out some on a plastic spoon. He smelled the spoon too. Very little aroma. Then he licked the spoon and said, "Ahhh. So wonderful to taste though." She looked at him curiously.

"What did you say?"

"Such a wonderful taste."

She sat back and thought. "Taste and see that the Lord is good," she remembered and recited to Pappas. He looked at her.

"Yeah, that's in the Bible some place, right? But I don't remember it as, 'smell and see that the Lord is good.'"



Karen was onto something, or so she thought. "Yes. Right. But when the holes appeared there was not actual honey around, just the wisp of it somehow. Each hole had it for a while. Then it was gone. But so many people from the churches and synagogues said they thought they smelled it. It's like it was a signal or a reminder of something. Maybe like a calling card." She shook her head dismissively. "I need to let this all go."

Pappas objected to that. "No, I don't think you will, and I don't think you can. I don't think that *we* will. Angels don't pop up all the time, right? And now you've got me thinking about the smell again. A calling card? From whom? And to whom? The church people? Can you put in a call to that angel and let's ask him?"

She didn't think that was funny. "Jim, I wish I could get that angel to appear again. But angels are not genies. And that was one of the most terrifying moments of my life."

"Yes, me too," he said. "But he seemed so good . . . and wonderful. And I bet he would explain all this if he showed up again. If I could keep my knees from knocking." She did laugh at that. Pappas had a way of lightening up a discussion. She said, "Jim if there was a volcano, a tsunami, and a blizzard all hitting us at once you would probably say, 'Hey let's have a barbeque-surf party-ski trip!'" But his focus was elsewhere.

He was pondering her idea now. He sniffed the honey dispenser again and squeezed some on his finger and licked it. "Whatever smell, taste, a cool signal, or leftover, or reminder, or calling card. Clearly, Karen it was not natural. It was left there for somebody."

"I think so," she said. "Wow. How weird. But how cool. Gives me the chills."

Pappas, being a researcher, started thinking harder. "Let's write down what we know," and grabbed a napkin. "It's been two months. Stuff has happened since then. The shootings and the governor sniffing around and the angel. But back to the basic event. Let's list what we know."

She got a pen out of her handbag and poised herself to take dictation. “First, all the buildings disappeared on the same night. There were twenty of them.”

Pappas added, “Two, the volume of displaced matter was exactly the same for each of the twenty buildings.” Karen rolled her eyes.

“Three, no people were killed or lost in any way although whatever was in the buildings is also gone. A clean burglary,” Karen said.

“Whoa Karen, no one has brought that up yet. Yes, number three is good.”

“Four,” she said, and Pappas interrupted, “We saw an angel. It’s part of this but we haven’t gone public with that.” She agreed, “Yes, it is a fact but neither of us has recovered from it yet. Nor have we talked about the letter from Michael.”

“Five,” he said. “Some corrosive substance was in the dirt at least at the one I was in. Didn’t burn me but I didn’t touch the dirt with bare skin. The governor did and her hand was seared.”

“Didn’t you tell me the chemical makeup was a mystery, too?” she asked.

“The lab analysis determined it to be an unusual combination of fluoroantimonic acid and three completely unknown other compounds,” he said.

She went on, “So Five is a known-unknown,” and tilted her head.

He shook his head and said, “This all blows my mind. I don’t know why this is all happening and why we’re sucked into it. Will you marry me?” And then he nervously laughed. “Just a joke, ya know, to break the tension.”

She wasn’t laughing. She looked at him. “Mr. Pappas,” she said, “that’s not something you say to break the tension.”

Now he was really embarrassed but also flabbergasted as to why that randomness came out of his mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m a stupid head. Really. I apologize.” And he turned a bright shade of pink.



She smiled, grabbed the honey, and squirted a big *blorp* right on top of his hand. “But I think you’re sweet, too.” Then, they both laughed.

55

One church hole was different from all the rest. It was the site of the Third Baptist Church, one of the Southern Baptist churches that had disappeared. The church had been a decent-sized facility. The hole—more of an indentation—was also 150,000 cubic feet, same as the rest, but only four feet deep. The other dimensions of the hole were 193.65 ft by 193.65 ft. It was almost a two-hundred-foot square with only four feet of depth. What was strange was that this was *not* the original footprint of Third Baptist. It had been an old and high 120 foot by 80-foot rectangular church which resembled late nineteenth or early twentieth century church architecture. Few noticed this difference in the first weeks, not even the pastor or long-time church members. It didn’t occur to them that their hole was not the exact footprint of their lost church building.

Who this did occur to was Jim Pappas who had visited that church some time back, with a courteous request as part of his job, to view some of their old artifacts, which included donated Baptist church paraphernalia from when the church was started around 1900. He remembered thinking, *why does a church this old call itself Third Baptist? Wouldn’t it have been the first Baptist church in Santa Fe?* There had been a large old Bible, a communion set, a member-register logbook and a few other fairly unremarkable things—precious to the congregation but not of particular significance.

He noticed early that this hole was not the shape of the church that had disappeared. He drove over there one Thursday evening, and the police tape had blown away although the stakes were still there. He looked at the soil and decided to touch the soil very carefully. He lay down next to one of the sharply cut edges. He reached his arm down and very lightly touched the bottom with his finger. No burning sensation. He reached his arm back up and smelled his finger. No odor. He did it again and this time risked three fingers for a light touch. Again, no burning. *The corrosive effect apparently fades,* he thought. He sat by the edge and pulled his

notebook out of his backpack and wrote the date, the location, and the new observation: With two careful tactile attempts, no burning or injury to fingers.

56

At the three-month mark, Cavern Fellowships were continuing to be scheduled around whatever individual church meetings were being held. The two priests went about their duties as before but were also paying attention, out of curiosity and out of a growing affection for victims of the saga that had unfolded in their town.

Bob Cohen and Mindy McConnell in general, were still paying attention although their mutual experience had shifted some to the shootings they had been involved with.

The governor and her daughter spoke of the whole affair often but with different perspectives.

The pastors were front and center in any Santa Fe official documents concerning their churches, and the IRS threat had not materialized.

Stephen Menendez was recovering and had been released from the hospital. He was being watched over even more vigilantly now because everyone was sure that the sole surviving attacker, sitting in county jail, had gotten word to the *Demônios* and they would not be happy about losing two soldiers to the outrageous interference of two slimy journalists.

*Screegion still skulked around, invisibly, watching its back for any signs of sudden angelic presence. It was as intrigued at this happening and as clueless about it as*



*any of the humans. While it delighted at their vexations, it no less hated every one of them, especially the sniveling ministers.*

*Kuriosagapa watched untiringly over Lieutenant Philipsburg and did not mind at all keeping an eye out for Sarah too. Other than that duty, he remained invisible to all except his angelic comrades. Time for him was a different thing. Things that had occurred on earth thousands of years ago were just as fresh and present today. The letter, which he delivered, from Μιχαὴλ ὁ ἀρχάγγελος still blazed in Kuriosagapa's thinking, musing himself at the archangel's closing statement, "I wish you Meshiach's blessing and this wisdom for you the mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust." It gave him joy to be around these happenings and to have a small part. But for any angel, let alone an archangel, to dispatch a deliberate, personal, and detailed communiqué to a human was not a thing that happened every day, or every century. Bless me, he thought to himself, I am so excited to see the plan of the King unfold. Oh, how He loves His people! His name be praised!*

57

Mindy McConnell was at the range again on a Saturday morning. She heard a vehicle pull up and, being more nervous now than three months ago, she looked at it warily. Doors opened and it was both Bruce Philipsburg and his wife, Sarah. Each toted a black plastic case and he had a satchel in his hand.

They walked up to an open stand and placed their things on the wooden table. McConnell nodded, placed her weapon on her table and spoke. "Good morning, Lieutenant Philipsburg, right?"

"Yes, Ms. McConnell, we've met once I think. This is my wife, Sarah." The women nodded at each other. There wasn't much else to say. The paths of these three, while all connected to Hit-G, did not intersect.

But Sarah had a thought after they had finished their target practice. "Ms. McConnell, some of us are having dinner tonight at Rosaria Moniz's home. Would you like to join us? Or maybe you've got other plans?"

Here was an unexpected turn—to be invited to a clergyman's home was not a thing that happened to her very often, or ever. She was surprised at how flustered she

felt, but managed, “Um, yeah, sure. That’s very kind of you. But I’m not a very religious person. I wouldn’t want to make people feel uncomfortable.”

Sarah laughed disarmingly and said, “Oh nonsense. It isn’t a church meeting or anything like that. But those of us who have been affected by the loss of our church buildings are getting together a lot more often now. We kind of need each other. And I know you would be welcomed by all there. You’re kind of in the club anyway,” and she laughed again. Her husband tried to laugh like his wife and it didn’t work, and she slapped his shoulder. But he said, “Yes, Ms. McConnell, everyone would love to have you there. It will be an informal supper and chatting and enjoying being together. Nothing more.”

“What should I bring?” asked Mindy.

“Just yourself, and how about a loaf of dinner bread? About six o’clock,” said Sarah. “Here’s the address,” and wrote it down on a scrap of paper.

* * * * *

As Mindy drove away from the range, she started wondering why she had accepted the invitation. These were not her kind of people but Sarah seemed genuine and, she thought to herself, *I am not joining their religion. It’s just dinner. Maybe I’ll get a fresh insight into Hit-G.*

She rolled into the Monizes’ driveway just before six, parked and took stock of the place. It was a small ranch, with the yard nicely manicured. There was flora all over the place and she judged that Rosaria took some pride in gardening. She went to the door and pushed the doorbell and was greeted by Victor Moniz, who said, “Ah, hello Ms. McConnell, Rosaria and I are really glad you could come!”

“Please, Pastor, call me Mindy. I’m off the clock tonight, I assure you.”

“Come in, come in and join us,” he warmly replied.

He led her into the dining room where she saw several others chatting and sipping glasses of red wine, iced tea, or soft drinks. In addition to Victor and Rosaria, there was Sarah and Bruce Philipsburg, Stephen and Sophia Menendez, and to her



surprise, Bob Cohen. She had no ax to grind with Mister Santa Fe Day and they had a natural camaraderie because of their shared event, but she was immediately suspicious.

Greetings were exchanged, and she gave a special and warm salutation to the Menendezes and shared that she was sincerely glad he was getting better. She hugged Sophia, and Sophia thanked her for her part in the altercation. Then Mindy went over to Mr. Cohen and took his side by the drinks table. He whispered, “Don’t look at me, I’m here on invitation of Pastor Menendez. He looks good, don’t you think?”

In a low voice, she agreed and poured a glass of wine for herself. Cohen had drained one and refilled his, but said to her, also quietly, “This is my limit. Besides, they probably need some for communion or whatever,” and chuckled. “Don’t be a jerk,” she said, but then they both laughed.

The eight of them had a leisurely dinner of tamales, enchiladas, a rice side dish, and a three-bean salad, plus, the bread and butter that Mindy brought. Conversation was relaxed and nicely paced. Cohen seated himself so that he could look out the front window and always view the front door. It came second nature to him. McConnell sat next to him and they hardly spoke to each other. Dessert was served by Rosaria and it was a lovely cheesecake, followed by coffee or tea. Victor said, “Let’s go into the living room,” and again Cohen took an easy chair facing the front door.

“Thank you dear, for a lovely supper,” Victor said to Rosaria and she smiled. They all complimented her on the dinner and especially the cheesecake which was homemade. There was no plan for the evening—just visiting and enjoying each other. The last three months had quietly bonded most of the Hit-G people in an unusual way. Even though not all were Christians, there was a common warmth between them all. After the attempted abduction of Stephen Menendez and his near-fatal injury, there was an even deeper feeling between those who had been there. There was a deep and often expressed gladness for Cohen’s and McConnell’s timely arrival at the scene and for their intervention. But there had not been an evening, before this one, when most of the principal participants had come together.

The evening was inexplicably pleasant and relaxed. Even with their defenders present, Steve and Sophia seemed at ease. The eight of them chatted about all kinds of things, their own recent experiences but also national events, the best restaurants in town, even the New Mexico Mustangs—the pro hockey team. There were also lots of compliments for Rosaria's numerous flowers out front.

Finally, after thirty minutes or so of conversation, Steve leaned forward in the couch, wincing from the lingering pain in his side. Everyone turned their attention to him.

"I want to say something to all of you," he began. "I want to say, kind of officially, how grateful Sophia and I are for how you have been there for us since the day . . . you know. It was such a randomly strange day, and I don't remember much after I was shot, but I want to thank you all for being there and for what each of you contributed." He glanced briefly at Cohen and McConnell. "Bob and Mindy . . . I want you both to know that I appreciate your intervention. The Lord certainly provided me with two guardian angels that day."

Now Cohen squirmed in his chair. He glanced autonomically at the door and then looked at the floor. He was not used to somebody speaking to him with such grace and warmth. It made him uncomfortable.

Then Sophia spoke. "I can't say I was praying right at the time," she said. "But I feel like I have never felt so much and so plainly before that God was there and had you two in the plan to go by our church site at that time. Thank you so much for your courage and . . ." Then she started to cry. This made Mindy uncomfortable, but she could not stay silent.

"Ya'll . . . um, I have been down since that day. I killed a man. Yes, it was a clean shoot, as the detectives said, but it has . . .," she hesitated ". . . messed me up. You know, you train with a weapon and practice, but it never really occurs to you that you might actually have to use it," and she started to cry too. Then a weird thing happened. Cohen took her hand and looked at Steve.



"Pastor, I'm not a religious man. I don't know if there is a God or if there are gods or if there is The Force or if we're just random bags of protoplasm flying through space. But I have to say—he still held Mindy's hand—both of us had our own sense of 'go' that morning. I can't explain that but we both felt it. That was definitely not chance. Something spoke. Listen to me, I sound like some kind of Pentecostal preacher," and he shook his head at himself. At that, everyone laughed and Victor said, "Amen," and they all laughed some more. At that Mindy took the instant to withdraw her hand.

Kuriosagapa was there, still invisible, inaudible, watching, and at Cohen's comments his eyes sparkled and he smiled.

Steve spoke some more. "I gotta say, this evening which wasn't overtly planned, has me feeling closer to you all than I think I have ever felt before to anyone. Thank you all for being my friends." He winced again and rubbed his side.

Then Bruce spoke. "Bob, I'm a military guy too. I am not quick to see mystical stuff going on. I fly helicopters. You fly the Pave Low on ops and you do your job getting from point A to point B. No mysteries. It's thrust, drag, altitude, and gravity. Basic science. But that day when my chopper went down, right next to my church, something strange was going on. We had hit an invisible barrier—no weather and no mountains," he laughed. "Some kind of wall we did not see at all. Weirdest thing in my whole flying career. My engineer hit the screen. But then it was like something held us there for a minute and then set us down gently.

"We could easily have been killed that day, if not on impact at least in an uncontrolled descent. But we sort of floated down. We hit hard enough to break the landing gear, but not hard enough to explode. Or at least we didn't explode. Hardly an hour has gone by since then that I have not been thanking God. Although I'm not sure my daughter was feeling thankful at the time," and he laughed.

Steve spoke quietly to no one in particular, "We call it providence. It doesn't mean luck. It means that somehow God was there, protecting us. Bruce and his engineer, me, Father Marty. Even you, Bob and Mindy," he looked at them, "were protected that day. Although I'm glad you had your guns with you." That made him wince again.

Now Cohen stood up. “It’s been a lovely evening and Rosaria, thank you for putting this all together.” But Mindy grabbed his hand and sat him down again. “Bob. Siddown, butthead, we’re not done yet. You got some pressing engagement for later?” They all laughed again and Cohen laughed too, almost too loudly. “Whoa, what was in that wine?” he said to Rosaria to which she flatly said, “Grapes. Heard of ’em?” and then she laughed at herself.

“I want to say something more,” Mindy went on. “You people are all religious, and I respect that.”

Rosaria made a Svengali-like hand gesture at her husband, who said, “Now Ro, behave yourself.”

Mindy continued. “I’m not religious. I am a reporter. When something happens, I want to know what, where, when, who, and why?”

“And if CNN tells me to, I go looking for other definers in a story. But this thing we are all in, is way beyond me doing journalism. There’s clearly more under the surface here than I can dig out. It’s all scary and completely fascinating. I think Bob feels similarly. I am intrigued. The disappearing churches . . .”

“And synagogues,” Bob added.

“The attempt to kidnap Steve, the lieutenant’s testimony about the helicopter, and other things make this one very strange plot. Is there a conspiracy going on? I want to know,” she added.

Victor picked it up there. “Yes, Mindy we’re all with you. We all want to know what is going on. But for myself, and I think I can speak for Steve and our wives too, we are persuaded this world is more than just physics and time. We see the God of the Jews and the Christians working out a grand plan. We aren’t so arrogant to know the details of that plan but we are convinced—aren’t we Steve? —that there is a map in God’s mind for everything that happens. I know that rubs against our culture which would rather have everything random, but that is what we see. I think there is indeed more going on around us.”

“Pastor, so what do you think is going on,” asked McConnell?



Victor looked at her carefully and waited. Everyone else waited too. He rubbed his eyes and stood up and walked around the room and then sat down again. He felt that this was an important moment for Cohen and McConnell and he didn’t want to blow it. And without his knowing it, although he was aching internally, Menendez was silently praying, *Lord, you are here tonight. Give grace please and somehow may this mystery unfold with light.*

Victor went on, “Mindy, we are all on a level playing field here. Before our churches disappeared, there was us, the churchy people, and folks like you and Bob out there, not-churchy people. I must confess, we church people can often be a little smug. I’m sorry for that. But this whole thing has brought a bunch of us together, humbled us, leveled us out. I don’t know why our churches vanished.” He looked at Bob and said, “And synagogues. But it wasn’t by chance, all agreed?” And everyone nodded, even Cohen.

“Yeah,” Bob said, “Too many odd and almost deliberate details for this to be by chance. Even I see that.”

“Yes,” Victor said. “And something is going on that is beyond us. I also don’t think that it was by chance that you and Mindy happened to feel the need to show up at the site at the time something bad was going down. I also don’t think it was accidental that your chopper did not blow up, Bruce, and that you plopped down at your own church.”

“Yup,” Bruce muttered.

“Some kind of design is here. Someone is managing this whole thing and I do not hesitate to share with you that I think it is spiritual. I hope that doesn’t annoy you too much, Bob,” Victor smiled.

“Nah, I’m too grizzled to throw out any theory at this point. I can’t believe I’m saying this,” and he hesitated, then glanced at Mindy and grimaced, “Go on.”

“Pastor,” Mindy interjected, “Just don’t talk down to us.”

*Wow,* Sarah thought, *we’ve got a conversation going here.*

Victor moved in his chair, looked directly at Mindy and gently said, “Of course. I don’t ever want to sound like I’m talking down to someone. But there’s more.”

At that moment Rosaria said, “Can I get anyone a coffee refill first?”

59

Everyone shifted, some got refills on their beverages, and Bob had another glass of wine. In a couple of minutes everyone settled in for more conversation. In his mind, Steve thought, *this is one of the most powerful moments in my life.*

Rosaria was silently praying. She also began to feel that this was an important evening although she couldn’t pinpoint why.

Steve brought the conversation back. “I was not raised in much of a faith. Catholic sort of. But I forgot all about religious stuff when other things became more interesting. I started doing weed, then drugs, then got into the industry side of it because the money was good.” He leaned back, adjusting himself because his side throbbed.

“But there was a hollowness inside of me. The more I explored fun and money and all that, the emptier I felt. I can’t say I was consciously seeking something more. But something more was seeking me. Then I met some people who started telling me about Jesus.”

He quickly went on, “I remember scoffing at the mere mention of Jesus. I would say, Oh Jésus, I know him. He lives over on Granada Avenue. These people laughed politely but they were dead serious. Like they actually had seen Jesus—the big Jesus. The old Jesus. The Jesus of the Bible.”

Mindy rolled her eyes. She said, “With all due respect, Pastor Steve, you’re planning to do the same thing to us?”

“I get it, Mindy. I was skeptical too when these guys were talking to me. We were in a coffee shop, like Alamos Brew. They were just so damned serious about it. Excuse me, dear,” and he glanced at Sophia, who smiled at him and shook her head.



“They wanted to tell me some stuff, and I listened. I had a package of heroin in my pocket at the time that I was copping for a friend and that guy was waiting for me outside a burger joint. But I stayed and listened to these guys, well, really one of them. He talked about Jesus not in some strange, you know, churchy way. He wasn’t Catholic or Pentecostal or anything I knew. He told me about Jesus in the Gospels. Straight up facts. That was all. No jive, no puttin’ the mojo on me, no asking me to do anything. Just stuff about Jesus. He told me the Lazarus story. And he told me about Mary Magdalene and seven demons. That creeped me out a little. But these guys really seemed to think Jesus was real.”

“And then what? You went out and joined a church?” Cohen rasped.

Steve looked at him and smiled. “No, I went and met the guy and gave him the heroin. Then I had the biggest, greasiest, most delicious burger of my life!” and they all laughed.

Sophia said, “And you didn’t bring me one?” and they laughed again.

“We had just started going out, and I didn’t want to mess with your perfect figure, darling,” and again they all laughed. Mindy rolled her eyes again.

Victor asked Steve, “So how did you go from not being a person of faith to having faith?” It was not planned, and no one thought it was, except Bob.

Cohen interrupted, “Yeah, Steve, *that*. Here comes the predictable part. Did an angel appear to you? Did you go down front at a church? Did you call up Billy Graham and say, ‘I’m ready, Billy’?”

“Such a jerk,” Mindy whispered to herself.

But aching as his side was, Steve was up to the occasion. “I did none of those things,” he said, looking at Bob. “In fact, I did nothing. Nothing at all. But what that guy had said wouldn’t leave my head.”

Mindy started to rise, but this time Cohen pulled on her hand. “C’mon Ms. CNN, we want the whole story, don’t we? The *rest* of the story?” She sat back down but remained poised like a runner at the blocks.

Out of nowhere, Bruce belched. Sarah looked at him horrified. She said, “Oh my gawd Bruce, we are *not* in a bar.”

“Sorry, but that was the best Mexican dinner I’ve had all year, dear,” Bruce said and grinned widely. That produced the loudest cacophony of the whole evening, tears streaming down several faces, and it broke the tension. Steve waited to see if the conversation would go further, or not. He felt like something more was in control than just his ability to manage a conversation.

But as the laughter died down, no one was leaving. Steve continued. “It was probably a week later. I was in my car and driving out to make another score. In my head came the thought, ‘Jesus has better for you,’ and I thought, ‘where did that come from?’

“I was troubled. And I still had that guy’s phone number so that evening I called him up. We met at that same coffee shop and he told me more about Jesus, the Bible, and the Gospel. Again, nothing happened. But I started to get interested. I didn’t know why then, but I do know why now.”

“So cut to the chase, Steve, please,” said Mindy.

“Right,” Steve said. “Sometime that week when I was outside—I know this sounds trite—I looked up into the sky and said, ‘Jesus if you’re there, show up for me. Reveal yourself to me. I’m cool if you do, but if you don’t, well . . .. The dude told me that the Bible says we’re all sinners. That means we’re all broken or diseased or rebels or something, I didn’t know much about Bible-talk yet. But it felt so right,” and he looked at the floor.

“We’re all sinners,” chirped Bob, “So what? I mean everyone knows that. I was taught that as a little boy. What’s the big deal? You didn’t know that?”

Steve went on. “I didn’t have much religious vocabulary. But the idea that there might be a better life was appealing to me. As I say, I don’t know why that ‘Jesus



has better for you’ idea came into my brain. But I found myself starting to believe in Him.” He hesitated, looking for the word. “I was hungering for Him. That’s the best I can explain it. And if you would have told me then that I would become a pastor, I would have smacked you. It was an empty hole inside of me. And the more I thought about the things that guy had told me about Jesus, which he said were all in the Bible, the hungrier I got.”

Cohen looked at McConnell and this time they both got up. It was eleven o’clock. Everyone was tired, and little more could be said that would add much. Victor felt a peace fall on him as did Rosaria. And Steve looked exhausted.

Cohen said, “Thanks Pastor Steve, that was heavy.” But he wasn’t being sarcastic or dismissive. He was pensive. Mindy thought that was the first time Bob had referred to him as Pastor Steve.

Hugs and handshakes all around, left-over cheesecake slices were handed out, and good nights were given, and everyone went home. Victor and Rosaria sat in the kitchen and had a word of prayer together. Then Victor’s cell phone chirped.



Victor answered his phone with a slightly annoyed, “Hello.”

“Pastor Moniz, I am sorry to bother you so late. This is Charlie Ethan. I’m the pastor of Southwest Evangelical Free Church.”

“Yeah, Charlie, I remember you. What’s up?”

“Again, I’m sorry to call you so late and especially on a Saturday night when we’re both preaching tomorrow, I assume,” and a pause.

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” Victor responded.

“But something has come up and I thought it was important enough to call you despite the late hour,” Ethan continued. “I’m at the site of our church on Cerrillos Road. I’m here because I got a call from one of our church members asking me to come over, so I did. She is not in great shape—says she hasn’t slept in three days

or something. She was sitting on the edge of our hole, in the dark, and was holding something, shall we say, unusual. That's why I thought I'd better call you. I know its ridiculously late but Victor, you'll want to see this."

"What is it," Victor asked?

"I'm not sure. It's like an architectural drawing or something. It looks sort of like *your* old church. When I got here, she was babbling and holding the picture up to the light of her cell phone," he said.

"Wow, weird. Yeah, I'll come over. Be there in a few."

"And Victor, here's the icing on the cake. The woman is the governor's daughter."

"Whoa," Victor said. "See you shortly."

And Moniz put his cell phone down. Rosaria looked at him and said, "I'm going with you." They grabbed jackets and headed out.

* * * * *

Victor and Rosaria pulled up at the Free Church site, finding Charlie Ethan and Maegan Grimley in Ethan's car, talking calmly and quietly. Charlie's wife, Guinevere, was in the back seat. The Monizes approached Charlie's side and he opened his door.

"Hi Victor, this is Maegan, and my wife, Gwen" he said.

Victor smiled and answered, "Good evening, ladies. A fine evening, don't you think?" He wanted to appear light-hearted although few in the Cavern Fellowships were feeling jovial these days.

The three got out of the car and Pastor Ethan immediately spread the document out on the hood of his car. Cell phones came out for illumination. All five looked at the large drawing.



The document was, to be sure, a drawing of a building. It resembled a typical architectural drawing with several views of the structure, but it differed in a few ways. There were no dimensions inscribed or embedded on any view but it clearly resembled the Santa Fe Christian Assembly facility—Victor and Rosaria's church. It had no architect's stamp or identification information. What it did have was in the lower right corner what looked like a paragraph of writing but in a script he had never seen. The print on the drawing was not black but a dark brownish-yellow and strangely . . . the drawing seemed to give off a faint sweet aroma.

That was the first thing Rosaria noticed. "What do I smell?" she said.

Guinevere said next, "I smell it too. That's what we smelled right after our building . . ." she stopped, as if looking for a good word, ". . . poofed, disappeared."

Victor was poring over the drawing. He ran his fingers over the lines and his palm over the surface of the drawing. "You know, this is not like any paper or vellum I have ever felt. It is too smooth. I love the feel of it."

Rosaria quipped, "You and the drawing want to get a room?" Victor dropped the drawing back on the hood abruptly, then laughed.

Maegan had returned to her normal self and added, "Man, I am tired. Can someone drive me home? Why are we out here in the middle of the night?"

Ethan's wife replied, "Of course Maegan, how are you feeling?"

Maegan said, "I am fine. Just really tired. I'll sit in the back of your car 'til you're ready to leave, okay, Gwen?" Gwen opened the door and patted her on the back. She got in and sprawled over to lay down on the back seat. Gwen left the door open.

Charlie asked Victor, "Do you want to hold on to this thing? Or I can take it back home with me. I thought I should call you, though I'm sorry it is so late."

"Yeah, let me take it. And I'm glad you called me. Let's pray together for a moment," Moniz replied.

Victor, Rosaria, Charlie, and Gwen circled around in the dark and had a moment of prayer together, a welcome refuge of safety for a moment. They finished and heard Maegan quietly snoring from the back seat of the car.

61

It wasn't until Sunday afternoon, after church, that Victor and Rosaria pulled out the drawing to look at it again. They spread it out on their dining room table and hunched over it together. They moved their hands over it and noted a pleasant sensation. It made Rosaria giggle.

She said, "Look closely Vic, there are faint lines." He looked intently and took the drawing over to the window. As he did, the lines became more distinct. He looked at Rosaria who shrugged. In the afternoon light there were indeed dimension lines with notations in the same script as the information box contained. Then Victor had an idea. He took the drawing to his desk in the bedroom and shined a bright desk lamp on it. The lines became even more discernible and before their eyes, they darkened and grew sharper. He looked at Rosaria. "The lines respond to light. I've never seen such a thing."

"Nothing surprises me any more Vic," she said.

"Let's go into the other bedroom and pull the shades and make it as dark as possible," and they did so. It wasn't totally dark but quite dim. He pulled out his cell phone and toggled the flashlight app and shone it on the drawing. The lines were completely gone once again. Moreover, the paper had lost its smoothness. Rosaria put her face near and sniffed. "Nothing," she noted.

They returned to the living room and placed the drawing back on the table and plopped back into the couch and easy chair.

"Holy Hezekiah," Victor mumbled.

Rosaria said, with animation, "It's aliiiiiiive!!!"

Victor sniffed, "Acts like it, doesn't it? Man, the hits just keep on coming."



"It's scary to me. We need to tell somebody, Vic. Why don't you call one of the guys?"

He thought for a minute. "Good idea, but not just one of the guys." He called a few: Charlie Ethan, Bob Cohen, and then he thought of Frank Portacomaro. He invited each of them to come to his home at eight o'clock.

When all three had arrived, and Rosaria offered them each coffee, they settled down and Cohen asked, "So what's up, Pastor? Did aliens touch down or did a Chinese delegation rise out of the ground?" and he laughed.

"You know, Bob, I almost wish one of those two things had happened. I'm afraid what I am going to show you is more mysterious."

"Oh good, Pastor, I was beginning to get bored," Cohen snorted.

Victor then unrolled the drawing and laid it out on the dining room table. They each looked carefully. Cohen's eyebrow went up and Father Frank remained unaffected though interested. "What is this?" he asked.

Victor spoke. "Charlie called me last night and invited me to come by his church site, even though it was late. Maegan was there, with this," he pointed at the drawing on the table. "She was kind of out of it, babbling like she was drunk, but part of it was lack of sleep. She fell asleep in the back seat of Charlie's car once we were all there. Anyway, Rosaria and I brought it home. You will notice the text in what would be the ID box in the corner."

Cohen said, "Klingonese?"

"Um, probably not Bob," Victor replied. "But what is it? And if you want weird, I'll give you weird." He produced the bright desk lamp and turned it on over the drawing.

"What are we looking at?" Cohen asked.

"Just wait," Victor said.

They waited a couple of minutes and then faint lines appeared, under the light, which grew more and more distinct.

Cohen said, “How’d you do that Pastor?”

“That’s the thing, Bob, I didn’t do it. It did it by itself, under bright light. I think it’s kind of cool, but I have no idea what this thing is.”

Father Frank then spoke. “What is this a drawing of – a church?”

Charlie replied, “It kind of resembles my church—my old church—my former church.”

Frank responded, “Yes it does,” and scratched his head. Then Charlie invited them all to give the drawing a sniff.

“Dang,” Frank said.

Cohen looked at him, then at the others. “Uh, I got nothing, what are you talking about?”

Frank said, “That strange very subtle honey-like smell.”

Cohen said, “Honey doesn’t smell usually, unless it has had some fragrance added, I think.”

“It’s not exactly honey, but sort of like it. Can’t you smell anything, Bob?” asked Frank.

“Nope, nothing. I guess I’m the odd man out,” snipped Cohen.

Charlie commented, “Why can some of us detect something and you cannot?”

The drawing, meanwhile, lay there and then did something also very strange, in fact, alarming. It began to hum.

* * * * *



Victor, Rosaria, Ethan, Cohen, and Portacomaro all moved back from the table. The drawing’s humming wasn’t loud. Out of nowhere, Cohen remembered a scene in a movie he saw as a child, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. A strange black monolith emitted a high-pitched squeal at one point, deafening the astronauts examining it. This was nothing like that, nothing so melodramatic, but it was unnerving anyway and the five were surprised.

Portacomaro said, “Maybe it doesn’t like being touched.”

To which Cohen countered, “Or maybe it does like being touched.”

Victor said, “We have no idea what we’ve got here. But it’s getting late, and I don’t think it’s going to harm us. Let’s put it under wraps and get a good night’s sleep. Ro and I will keep it safe and I would suggest that we not talk about this to anyone, for the moment anyway.”

“A good novel is going to come out of this, pastor,” chuckled Cohen.

Rosaria, reading her husband’s thinking, produced a blanket and rolled up the drawing again and carefully, warily. They all shook hands and departed. Victor and Rosaria looked at each other and went to bed.

62

Rafael Donner, cantor of the Shalom Congregation, was a reader. He especially loved to read historic books, to stretch his mind and to deepen his understanding. While in one of his favorite used bookstores, Book Mountain, he spied a thick paperback by Jonathan Edwards called *Religious Affections.* As he pulled it off the shelf, he noticed it was worn and the back cover was missing. But as he thumbed through the pages, his interest grew quickly. Rafael, like most of Shalom, was a Messianic Jew. He had come to accept and believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the true Messiah of Israel. Moreover, as he read through the Gospel of John in the New Testament, he was finding himself hungering for more understanding of what it means to walk with Jesus. Now, here was a book written by a fellow who he recalled preached a sermon a long time ago called, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

So naturally *Religious Affections* intrigued him. He purchased the book for five dollars and went over to Alamos Brew to read over a hot mocha.

He sat sipping his mocha and began. *Man,* he thought, *just reading the contents is making me break into a sweat.*

*Showing What Are No Certain Signs That Religious Affections Are Gracious, or That They Are Not*

This was followed by twelve false signs of spirituality.

*Showing What Are Distinguishing Signs of Truly Gracious and Holy Affections*

And this was followed by twelve signs, at least in Edwards' opinion, of true spirituality.

He decided to sample one of the true signs. He flipped to number three. It was entitled, *Those Affections that are Truly Holy are Primarily Founded on the Loveliness of the Moral Excellency of Divine Things.*

"Wow. I get that. Real faith sees the goodness and beauty of who God is." He thought more. "And even before we ponder what we might get from God, it is perceiving how wonderful He is, just for Himself."

At that moment, Karen Asnat came into the shop, saw him, nodded, and ordered a coffee. "Good afternoon, Cantor, how are you?"

"Very fine, thank you Karen. I hope you are well. Care to sit and visit?"

She looked around carefully and agreed. "What are you reading, Cantor?"

"This is an old title I picked up by the old Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, called *Religious Affections*."

"Yes, I've heard of him," she replied. "What's it about?"



Donner sipped his mocha. "Since we are both Jesus-believers, yes, I can share with you openly. I would be careful elsewhere, perhaps. Edwards wrote this book to distinguish between false evidences of a loving God, which apparently were rampant in his day, and true evidences of a loving God. It is wordy and colonial, but very interesting, the little I have read so far."

Karen was immediately interested and asked to see the book, though it was not the kind of book which might be easy to quickly digest. She read about half a page, picked up her phone, and Amazon-ed herself a copy. "Oh my, Cantor, was that rude of me? Am I hijacking your book?" and she was embarrassed. Donner laughed, "No not at all, I am happy to share in the harvest," and they both laughed. They enjoyed their beverages and parted with farewells. It was a relaxed and refreshing moment of fellowship between two unlikely converts to Christ.

63

On Monday afternoon Victor and Rosaria pulled out the drawing again and laid it on the table. No lines or noise or fragrance appeared. It was just there, with its strange box of illegible script. It appeared to be a drawing of a building, resembling that of Southwest Evangelical Free Church. But it seemed like a more imposing concept than what had existed before the holes. And how did Maegan come to acquire this drawing? And what had happened to her that night—in the presence of the drawing? And what did this all mean?

"I wish it would talk to us," said Rosaria.

Victor stared at it and replied, "And what do you wish it would say?"

"What it is, what's going on, and maybe what's going to happen."

"Yeah, those answers would be great. And, what happened to Jimmy Hoffa, where is Amelia Earhart living now, and is it at this time that Jesus is restoring the kingdom?"

Rosaria stuck her tongue out at Victor and then put her arms around him. She said, "Let's pray about this thing, okay?"

Victor prayed first. “Lord, we have no idea why all these strange things are happening and least of all what this document is. But we give ourselves and our presence here, in this time, over to You again. Use us, we pray, however You wish and give us light and wisdom. We also pray for Charlie and Gwen, that You would show them whatever You wish for them to do in ministering to Maegan.”

Then Rosaria prayed, too, “Lord Jesus, thank You that You have privileged us to go through this time of unanswered questions. It’s clear that we cannot rely on ourselves for answers. You have invited us to ask for wisdom when we lack it, so we are doing that. We are at Your service, Lord. And I also pray for Maegan and pray that You would give her Your peace and comfort and show her whatever she is supposed to learn about You in this time. In Your name, amen.”

When they opened their eyes, they looked at the drawing. No odd things were happening. Rosaria wrapped the item in the blanket again, but left it there on the table, and Victor went out to run some errands.

64

Charlie Ethan was preaching to his congregation, the Southwest Evangelical Free Church, meeting this Sunday in the YMCA on Airport Road. He was in the Book of Revelation, chapter 1. His text was verse 10.

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet,” Pastor Charlie said. “When John laid down his pen, at the end of chapter 22, and the Revelation was finished, or at least what he was told to write, I wonder how he felt? When the prophet Daniel or the prophet Ezekiel laid down their writing instruments, I wonder how they felt? To hear from the Lord in such dramatic and unmistakable ways—revelatory and prophetic—would really drain the prophet, don’t you think? I wonder how you’re feeling this morning?”

Maegan Grimley was part of the gathering on this Lord’s Day morning, listening, thinking, and yes, still exhausted. To herself, she said, *Yes Pastor, I am exhausted, but I don’t know why.* She was a little woman, five feet five, about one hundred pounds. She was generally fit and liked to exercise, but since that strange night at their own Hit-G site and the loss of her building, she was empty. Like she had lost a loved one. It was gone. She still had no idea why she had stumbled across the



drawing. To her eye, it was beautiful, as if she could see more than anyone else. She rubbed her temples as the pastor preached on, but she wasn’t really hearing him. Her thoughts were on the drawing. Yes, she could design a new building. In fact, she could design more than one. With no understanding why, ideas came into her head—one after another—for other buildings that the Cavern Fellowship churches could use. Was that reasonable? Was she crazy? But as she thought about the drawing, ideas flowed into her thinking. She took out a pen she carried in her purse and began sketching on the church bulletin. The ideas were coming so fast she could hardly keep up with herself.

After church she waited until everyone was gone, except Pastor Charlie and his wife, Guinevere. She approached them with an odd smile on her face.

“Hi Maegan, how are you doing?” asked Guinevere.

Maegan smiled wider and said, “I’ve felt so unsettled lately, Gwen, worn out. Drained. But today, during the message I got a blast of energy.” She handed the pastor’s wife the bulletin. It was covered with simple drawings. You couldn’t read any of the bulletin text as there was drafting all over the paper. Gwen handed it to her husband.

He laughed, “My message really spoke to you eh, Maegan?”

She replied, “Yes, in fact, pastor, it seems to have awakened something in me. I started thinking about an idea for a new church for us, and then I started thinking about the other churches too. She pointed at one footprint of a building and said, “This could be Christian Assembly,” and then moved her finger to another one, “And this could be New Beginnings, and this cool one here, two sides to it, could be the two synagogues.”

She was sweating and the pastor was concerned. But he also sensed that something special was happening. He said, “Would you like to join us for lunch, Maegan? Gwen and I are going to go get some soup and sandwich at Sazón’s.”

“Yes, yes pastor, that would be nice.”

Pastor Ethan locked the doors and took a last scan around the gym to make sure everything was okay, and off they went. “I’ll swing by later to check it one more time.”

65

Christmas Eve was approaching, and on the twenty-first, it was forty degrees, dry and windy. Several of the Hit-G church families were planning an outside candlelight service and a live Nativity presentation. Camels were not to be found but donkeys and sheep and two horses were made available.

Karen Asnat and Cantor Donner volunteered to arrange the music program and, since there was no building, there were no seating restrictions. They hoped for no late-breaking winter storm.

Pastors Victor Moniz, Charlie Ethan, and Jim Zorowski from First Baptist Church were collaborating on a tag team concoction of Scripture readings and five-minute sermonettes, and they invited Father Marty Clark to join them if he wanted to. His parish was doing a midnight mass so he was free for the planned six o’clock outside service. He said he would be delighted to participate.

The site selected was near the hole-in-the-ground formerly known as The King is Coming Community Church because it was adjacent to a large, flat-topped elevation with an expansive plain around it. There would be plenty of parking and it was thought the mesa would protect them from wind. The pastors decided to invite as many residents as they could and they imagined a unique opportunity to testify to their trust in God despite the as-yet unexplained losses of their facilities.

Maegan Grimley invited her mother and even got word to the IRS officer who had sent the ominous letter to the churches. Lieutenant Philipsburg invited several Air Guard personnel and was working to get permission to fly into the site dressed in a Santa suit, in their new HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter.

Mindy McConnell asked permission to broadcast from the site in a CNN special report.



Detective Sylvia Morrisette, on behalf of the Santa Fe Police Department, offered to arrange a security patrol to be present, and State Trooper Avon Duvall promised a second ring of quiet security with a few off-duty state troopers.

No one invited the *Demônios Elevados* but for a moment it flashed past Stephen Menendez’s thinking. They of all people need to get flashed with the message of Christmas. But he put it out of his mind as fast as it had entered, and his side ached at the thought.

Jim Pappas invited Dr. Smythe from the hospital. Manya invited a few from Alamos Brew. Bishop Jones and First Lady Cecelia made a trip by the Apache office in Santa Fe and made an invitation to members of that tribe to come as guests, since Cecelia had Apache in her heritage.

It occurred to Mindy that of all the principal participants in the Hit-G events of this year that Bob Cohen was conspicuously absent from any discussions of preparation for this service. Not that this surprised her particularly, but still, she was curious that no one had thought to mention it to him.

* * * * *

*Screegion and his contagion, were certainly aware of all this Christmas Eve talk and darkly brooded about it. It was aware that a powerful angelic presence was around and it was annoying. This demon remembered a line from a Christian song from five centuries before—and he knew it to be true—"For Lo, his doom is sure . . .”*

66

On the evening of the 22nd, Bob Cohen was knocking back a six pack in his RV. He was on number three and there was little news that day so he posted a few lukewarm news stories from the state and national feed. But he was bored.

His cell phone chirped and he looked at it. It was Mindy McConnell. For a moment he debated whether to ignore it. Then he decided that it cost less to answer it than it would cost to not answer it. “Yeah, hi,” he said.

Mindy came back, “Yeah, hi to you Mr. Recluse.”

“What can I do for you Miss McConnell?” he said.

“A little dip in the action and now you’ve gone underground. Where the heck have you been hiding?”

“I’m exploring some deeper insights into hops and herbs.”

“Oh. You’re inhaling weed through beer in your bong?”

“What can I do for you Miss McConnell?” he repeated.

“I’m coming by,” and she ended the call.

“Whatever,” Cohen mumbled to himself, “and bring some Doritos,” he mumbled after she had hung up. And then he fell asleep.

67

Mindy knocked on the door of the RV and received no response. She knocked again, more forcefully, and the door opened. Cohen greeted her, “Entrez, m’lady.” He was clearly tipsy and she hesitated. “Did you bring any Doritos?” he asked and stepped aside so she could come in.

“No, but I did bring you a hot coffee,” Mindy responded and handed him a warm Alamo Brew, large.

“Coffee. Bah. Humbug,” Cohen barked, thinking it was funny.

Mindy sat herself in his desk chair and asked, “Did no one invite you to the Christmas Eve Nobody Has a Church Event?”

“The what?” he said and inadvertently burped.

“God you’re a pig tonight,” she said.

“Oink the halls with lots of salsa, fa la la la la, la la la la.



“Really, Bob, there’s a big event about to happen and no one invited you?” she inquired, a little less gruffly.

“Yeah, Father Clark said something about it,” Cohen grumbled.

“Get your shit together and let’s go. You cannot miss this,” she ordered.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because one, you’re no true news hound if you drink yourself under at this one. Two, it is rude with all that has happened, and if you don’t already know it, these people think you’re important. And three, if you don’t accept my invitation, I have to go alone to something on Christmas Eve,” she said.

“A’ight, if Miss Cable News Network insists, I guess I’ve had worse invitations in my sorry life.”

She pulled a clean shirt from his hanging rod of shirts and pants and grabbed a can of deodorant and sprayed at his left underarm.

Cohen laughed at that, and said, “Geez Loueeze, don’t go trying to make me respectable.”

She helped him change his shirt, don a reasonable coat and a leather hat that curiously had the slogan, “Never Out of the Fight” embossed on the brim.

“I don’t usually wear that,” he weakly objected.

“Don’t give me any crap. I don’t want to be late,” and they moved to the door. Mindy didn’t notice, but Cohen grabbed his pistol off the counter and jammed it in his belt at his back, under his coat. Its magazine had seventeen rounds in it.

* * * * *

As she drove the short distance, Mindy asked him, “You given any thought to that evening at the Monizes?”

“Yeah, funny you should ask, I have. It sure wasn’t a night to forget,” Bob replied.

As they approached the open area they saw lots of cars, pick-ups, SUVs, and some official-looking vehicles. “What the . . .?” Cohen asked, getting more lucid as the coffee kicked in.

Mindy explained, “The governor was invited and apparently she has accepted the invitation.” She started humming “Deck the Halls” and actually seemed cheerful.

As they parked, Cohen noticed five black large Suburban-sized vehicles interspersed between other vehicles but clearly the same make. He also noticed they had no visible license plates. His internal Spidey-sense alarm went off. “Wait a minute, Mindy,” he said. “Park right here and let me look at something.”

“Ok,” she said and parked next to one of the black vans. Immediately she seemed to sense something vaguely disturbing, as did Cohen. “What are you thinking, Bob?” she asked, almost in a whisper.

“Those are not official New Mexico state vehicles and they aren’t Air Guard either,” he said slowly. His eyes scanned slowly from one end of the van to the other.

Mindy looked around and noticed that two others were in view. No people around. Then she noticed a quick but muted flare from the backseat of one of them, like someone had lit a cigarette. The glass was apparently blackened but did not completely shield the little flame inside. Now she was fully alert, as was Bob.

“Something’s not right,” he said. She reached for something in the dark from inside the console between the two seats. It was her Beretta 92A1. His Glock G19 pressed into the small of his back. Both were fully loaded.

“Stay here,” Cohen directed and started to open his door.

“Wait,” Mindy said and grabbed his left arm. “Let’s both approach from different directions.”



They each quietly and slowly opened their doors and walked to opposite ends of the grouping of Suburbans. Nothing moved that they could see from within the vans. They circled around and met up on the far side. Still no movement. They could hear crowd noise and some music from the gathering, about fifty yards away. No people were milling around the parked vehicles.

Then they heard a male voice say from behind another of the vans, *preparem-se irmãos.* Get ready, brothers. Mindy and Bob both froze in their tracks. Then Bob shoved Mindy down and they hugged the ground. He leaned over and said very quietly into her ear, “Something bad is about to go down. Are you with me or do you want to stay here?” She shivered and replied, “lead on.” He smiled, patted her twice on the shoulder and said, “Okay Lady Commando, do what I do.” She actually felt good about the title.

Cohen crawled to the edge of a car and looked under it. She did the same and they both crawled very quietly on the grass. Under the next car over, he noticed the feet of several people, shifting about like they were readying a march. They then moved away together, toward the Christmas Eve gathering. Cohen got up on his knees and then crouched into a squat. Mindy did the same. He scanned all around, saw no other people and whispered, “The fools set no perimeter.” She said nothing.

He slowly rose to standing, and she did likewise, moving in behind him. He looked at the black vans again. Nothing. But he felt they were not completely empty. He held her arm to communicate. “Let’s be still for a minute and watch.” She understood. They were behind a car.

They could hear “Oh Little Town of Bethlehem” being sung in the distance, and Cohen moved a little to the front of the car and then stood silently. She mimicked him and thought, *he is being so careful.*

He moved a little more to the left and froze again, being careful to make no sound with his feet. His pistol was still in his belt. He was giving thought to every move of his limbs. She was still shivering a little but it wasn’t terribly cold. *I thought we were going to a Christmas Eve service,* she thought to herself. Then, from somewhere deep inside, a prayer arose, “Lord, get us through this please.”

Cohen moved some more, to the front of another car and crouched down, still, listening and scanning all around. She did the same with her Beretta in her hand, thumb poised on the safety.

The singing continued and there appeared to be a campfire giving off some light. They could see silhouettes of the crowd around it. Cohen remained crouched, watching. Mindy listened, then something caught her eye between them and the gathering. Cohen whispered ever so quietly to himself, “What I wouldn’t give for some NVGs right now.”

She gently poked at his shoulder and gestured to the right. He looked hard. A single figure was easing through the crowd, dressed darkly. When a glimmer of light flickered on the figure’s shoulder, Cohen instantly knew that this was a military officer who had not obscured his shoulder rank insignia.

He whispered to Mindy, “It’s cool. Air Cav. Move back to the left.”

He moved slowly, walking low, to the left, followed by McConnell. They were invisible and no one was in their path. As they got about twenty yards from the gathering, they crouched again behind a jet-black Dodge RAM. Mindy crouched beside him, waiting, weapon in her hand.

At that moment Cohen noticed a small ravine to the left of the gathering. It was black in the dark but he thought he heard muffled voices. He froze.

“*Seguanças desligadas*,” safeties off, like a command and Cohen heard it. So he did as commanded and removed his pistol from his belt and thought to himself, *Glocks have no safety, hombre.*

On instinct, Cohen then looked around and found a rock about the size of a softball. He grabbed it and lobbed it as he would a grenade, towards the ravine. It struck something and a shot rang out. Then Cohen and McConnell heard a stifled “*Merda!*” and someone else, “*Santa Maria!*” like a curse. People on the edge of the crowd turned toward the sound of the gunshot. It was not a .22 caliber popping sound. It was a .45 caliber boom. Oddly, no one moved—they were in stunned surprise. And then a group of darkly dressed figures with masks jumped out of the ravine and moved, disorganized, towards the gathering. It looked to be a group of



about fifteen figures, male, and armed. The governor’s security team, four plainclothes men, moved around her and tried to shove her back, but she stood her ground.

68

Pappas had not gone to the Christmas Eve service. He had a bad cold and had been sniffling all day. Karen intended to make a pizza and stay with him in a Christmas Eve nursing role, but he had held her off and said that he didn’t want her to catch his bug. Reluctantly she drove off to attend the service with a feeling of unease that she didn’t quite understand.

* * * * *

*Kuriosagapa hovered above Lieutenant Bruce Philipsburg who was crouched to the right of the assembly wearing a dress raincoat, with his service weapon in hand. He was keenly aware that something was afoot to ruin Christmas Eve. Insofar as he knew, the three state troopers and the governor’s security team were not aware of any unusual activity. At least they had no one visibly deployed in a cautionary move.*

*The angel watched, not moving and not visible to anyone. In the distance, over the group of bandidos, he could see Screegion and five nameless demons. They were like old, worn-out steam locomotives, chugging, spitting, letting off steam, not impotent but undignified. Kuriosagapa still did not move.*

* * * * *

As it happened, Karen Asnat pulled into a parking spot about fifteen feet back from where Bruce Philipsburg had been standing. She did not see him but in the gleam of her headlights she could see that there was movement all about. She thought, *Am I too late? Are they breaking up now*? Then as she was getting out of her car, she also heard the gunshot.

Philipsburg heard her, looked around, recognized her, and said, “Karen, get over here.” She rushed to join him. “Lieutenant, what is going on?”

“Ssshh, please, Miss Asnat. Stand here with me. Something bad is happening,” he quietly and quickly explained. She huddled against the taller man and grabbed his elbow.

Another angel appeared beside Kuriosagapa. Neither spoke; each watched and knew their charges.

* * * * *

As the rabble of fifteen assailants approached the startled gathering, the leader—who wore a hood with eyeholes—barked, “All you people do not move and no one will get hurt. We want Menendez.” He sounded angry and each member wielded one kind of rifle-type weapon or another. There were some two hundred Christians in attendance, men, women and children. The leader walked slowly now around the crowd, guarded by his companions.

Victor Moniz stepped forward, slowly and not provocatively, in the direction of the leader. He lowered his eyes to the ground and said, “I am Pastor Moniz, sir. This is Christmas Eve and we are having a church serv—”

The leader squeezed off a round at the pastor’s feet and yelled, “Shut up *padre*, I don’t care who you are or what you silly *tolos* are doing. I am a reasonable man. I want one thing and we shall leave you to your *Natal*. Where are you Menendez? You have some accounting to do.”

Moniz moved forward but then was held back abruptly by Pastor Stephen Menendez, who then stepped into the center of the altercation. “Here I am, João,” he said calmly. “Seems your attack dogs couldn’t get the job done.”

“Don’t antagonize these guys, Steve,” Moniz said quietly.

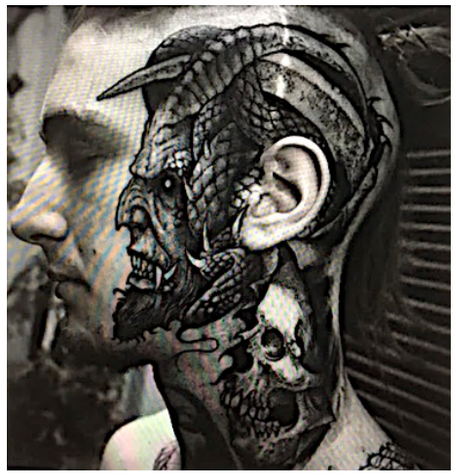
“Antagonize, *Padre*? That is no problem,” said the leader. His English was excellent with a strong Brazilian accent. “We are very gentle men with a simple mission tonight. Stephen, we wish you to come with us for some discussions about some product that you have owed us, with *interesse*, I might add, for some time now. You can come easily or this can become a very, very sad evening. And would it not



be *trágico* for any of these fine pilgrims to die on Christmas Eve? That will be on you, *amigo* Stephen, should you wish it.”

Menendez looked quickly around, discerned no way out of this dilemma, and said calmly, “As you wish, João.” But his wife, Sophia, was not so acquiescent. She pushed past her husband, looked the hooded bandit in the eyeholes and said, “Listen coward, if you are going to kidnap my defenseless husband at least have the courage to show your face.”

Instead of being angered, João laughed and reacted much more eloquently. “That is fine, *señora*,” and he removed his hood. A fine-looking visage presented to her, with a broad scar across the right cheek and a demon tattoo on the whole left side of his face.



He wore a tightly trimmed mustache and bore into her with his stare which was as cold as ice. He pointed his rifle at her and wildly squeezed off a round. It went through her shoulder and she screamed, fell backwards, then to her knees, and into her husband’s arms. Moniz then moved towards him and João stuck the barrel into his chest and yelled, “*você pode ter algum tamdém padre,*” you may have some too, padre. Moniz stopped and gave the man and evil glare.

*Screegion motioned to one of the other demons, who moved down into the group and spoke something unintelligible in the ear of João. The facial tattoo in the dim*

*light seemed to become animated and spoke in a thin, evil voice, "death to all you fools." The other five demons howled above and cursed together in an ugly sound, not heard among people—but heard by the two angels.*

João grabbed Menendez by the arm, his weapon still pointed at Moniz. He dragged Menendez a few feet away from the crowd and the pastor did not resist. Sophia, now cradled by Rosaria Moniz, wept, and lay down on the ground. The two hundred people, until now motionless, backed away from the assailants. It looked like the evening was over and Pastor Menendez was a loss.

But at that moment, Cohen and McConnell, separated by about five feet, pistols drawn, said nothing and walked into the scene. With no knowledge of his two fellow soldiers, Philipsburg approached from the other side, his .45 drawn and held aim on João.

The security team of the governor stayed in front of her and the state troopers slowly tried to back away quietly into the dark. The governor had been watching the whole thing intently and called out, "Sirs, you cannot get away with this. You will be unable to escape!"

It sounded lame and too rehearsed, but João stopped for a moment. He seemed momentarily confused and did not know that the Governor of the State of New Mexico was present. To himself he quickly thought, *The governor! What a great prize she would have been.* His hesitation would be his undoing.

Cohen said in a voice he had not used in years, "João, do you remember me?"

The leader squinted and tried to focus on Cohen in the dark. Then he remembered Cohen and laughed, "Yes, of course, old sailor man. Do you think you can *repetir* your luck?" He held his weapon to Menendez's head and shoved him towards the group of vans.

Cohen replied, "No luck. Just aim," and with no hesitation waved his Glock towards the demon-decorated leader and pulled the trigger. The 9mm round pierced João's neck and he fell backwards, releasing the pastor, who fell to the ground.



Philipsburg then called out, "There are more here than you know, compadres. Drop all weapons NOW."

But the assailants were not easily intimidated. They had lots of guns and lots of men to use them. They moved to take more hostages, but Cohen dropped another one, and another one.

Another assailant raised his rifle at Mindy and, without hesitation, she aimed her Baretta and fired three shots, all of which struck the man. He fell to the ground.

The people were hysterical with fear but stood still. Philipsburg moved quickly around, to distract the bandits away from the governor's position. A bandit aimed his automatic rifle and fired a burst. One round struck the lieutenant in the boot but Philipsburg returned fire and one .45 caliber round knocked the man over and he lay on the ground, motionless.

The three state troopers had managed to get behind the assailants in the dark and their sergeant called out, "Drop your weapons!"

Flanked by six armed defenders, five *demônios* down, the rest complied. "Weapons on the ground and arms up," was the next command, and all did as they were told.

The governor's security team leader had managed to text an emergency code to their headquarters five minutes earlier, and at that moment two special tactical vans roared into the field and quickly disembarked ten armed officers.

Cohen walked over to the prostrate João, still alive but choking. The demon tattoo was silent. Cohen looked into his eyes and said, "I am sorry, João, but I warned you ten years ago." At that, João rolled his eyes, bled out and succumbed to his wound. He was gone.

*Screegion and partners screeched a horrible sound and it said, "Bravo, two more for the tank."*

Mindy did as Cohen had done. She walked to her assailant with her pistol aimed still. He was also still alive but not moving. He appeared to be wearing body armor but her three rounds had found flesh in the groin area and in the man's right thigh.

He was in agony. Mindy coldly looked him in the eye and said nothing. He looked away.

Karen attended to the lieutenant's foot. He lay back and she unlaced his boot and tried to remove it. He grimaced. The round had penetrated the boot but in losing so much velocity only partially entered his toe area. It was intensely painful but Karen managed to stop the bleeding with pressure and her scarf wrapped around it. Although he was hurting, he managed to tell her, "Pretty good field dressing." Tears fell from her face onto his bandaged foot.

* * * * *

With the assailants all in custody, the EMTs summoned, and the perimeter checked and secured, Governor Grimley moved from person to person. She was somewhat shaken herself. She said to Pastor Moniz, "Pastor, the next time you invite me to a Christmas Eve service, please have enough elves and reindeer on guard duty." The pastor laughed and felt no need to apologize but said, "Madam Governor, it's a deal." The governor's daughter, Meagan, held her Mom's arm and quietly accompanied her from person to person.

Someone else was holding on to someone's arm too. Mindy McConnell held Bob Cohen's arm for dear life and said, "All this and no Doritos, sailor." He chuckled and held her close.

Pastor Menendez and Victor and Rosaria Moniz were bent over the wounded Sophia Menendez. Stephen was weeping and Sophia was comfortably out, from the morphine injection given to her by an EMT who had field-dressed her shoulder wound and was readying her for transport to the ER. She would survive and for these few minutes at least, the loss of twenty buildings seemed unimportant. In fact, that big issue of the past few months entered the mind of not one person in the crowd of worshippers, state officials, journalists, or gang members.

Only Kuriosagapa pondered the Hit-G incidents and knew that it was all part of the plan.

* * * * *



João and one other *demônios* died. The other three wounded assailants were treated by the EMTs and transported to the ER under heavy guard. The cigarette-lighter individual heard the gunfire, exited his vehicle, and sprinted into the darkness. He had been the get-away driver but had lit up a *cigarro de maconha* and was now less than chilled.

Two of the Cavern pastors moved among the worshippers, consoling them, and having a word of prayer with those who wished it. Then, with the governor still present, they all sang "Silent Night" and began to depart. All were shaken. All would remember this Christmas Eve for the rest of their lives.

69

On this same Christmas Eve, Jim Pappas lay in his apartment, alone, snorting and coughing and feeling quite sorry for himself. And yes, he was watching more *Star Trek* episodes until he dozed off, two beer cans and a half-consumed hot chocolate decorated the small coffee table.

At nine thirty that evening there was a tap at his door, and he stumbled over and opened it. There stood Karen Asnat, staring at him, her hair all over the place, blood on her shirt and jeans. One might have thought that she would have gone home after the incredibly harrowing evening, but in her emotional daze, she drove to Pappas' place, from whence her evening had begun.

Jim stood at the door looking at her in shock. "My God what happened? Come in."

She collapsed in his arms and hugged him so hard he thought she might break him in two, and she was sobbing. He ushered her over to the couch and they sat down. He said nothing and just let her weep, holding her. Neither of them looked particularly well-kempt.

"Jim . . . oh my . . . Jim . . .," and she continued weeping.

"Take your time. We're in no hurry. What in the world has happened?" he asked.

“People were shot,” she said through her crying. “The service had begun and these men—a lot of them—came out of the dark and wanted to kidnap Stephen Menendez.”

“What?” Pappas snapped, and stood up, like he was going to rush out and do something.

“They stormed us and they all had guns, and one guy said they wanted Pastor Menendez.”

Pappas stayed quiet.

“They were going to take him, but then the shooting started. Bob and Mindy came out of nowhere. They shot people,” Karen said. Then she became quiet. “They shot the pastor’s wife,” she added, and stayed quiet.

“And near me, Lieutenant Philipsburg approached them, and he got shot,” she said.

“My God, Karen, my God,” was all Pappas could say.

“He’s going to be okay. He was shot in the foot,” she added, “and I was trying to bind up his wound. I think the pastor’s wife will be okay. The shot went through her shoulder.”

“Then that’s the lieutenant’s blood on you?” Pappas asked.

She looked down at herself, as if she hadn’t known that she was blood-covered. “Oh. Yes, I guess so. It’s not my blood. I wasn’t shot.”

“Weren’t there police or officers from the governor’s office there? I thought the governor was supposed to be there?” Pappas inquired quickly.

“Yes, yes, they were there. I don’t know. I don’t know where the officers went. The governor said something to the guys, too. But Bob and Mindy started shooting, and some of the guys went down. It was terrible,” she was talking to herself as much as to Pappas.



“And on Christmas Eve,” he muttered.

She looked at him, grabbed him again, and said, “How could this happen?”

Pappas again remained quiet for a moment or two. Then he pushed her away slightly to look intently at her. He said, “It is terrible, Karen, and I know this will be the worst Christmas Eve ever but tell me who was shot and how it ended.”

She sat back on the couch and sighed, relaxing finally. “I think the lieutenant and the pastor’s wife were the only ones among us who were shot. As far as I could see several of the guys who attacked us were shot. I think a couple were killed. I saw the governor’s officers approach from out of the dark near the end of the thing.” She paused. “And I heard the governor say something about elves and reindeer,” and she laughed.

Pappas got up and went to the refrigerator to get a beer for Karen, which she accepted and sipped. Pappas sat back down and looked her over carefully. “So you are okay, I mean, you are not injured?”

“Yes,” she answered. “But I suppose I should go home and get a shower and go to bed.”

“Yes, of course,” he said. She got up and now seemed embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Jim. This probably ruined your Christmas Eve too.” He sneezed, and they both laughed.

He put his arm around her and walked her to her car. She turned and looked into his eyes. She started to say something, “Jim . . .” He took her head into his hands, then, and kissed her, and said, “Merry Christmas, Ninja Editor,” which made her laugh again, and she kissed him back and got into her car. As she drove away, a broad smile broke out on her face.

Pappas stood there in the dark and watched her drive off. Then, out of nowhere, there was a warm glow in front of him and suddenly an angel appeared. He was tall as before, serenely still, and powerful, and full of peace and Pappas now knew him. He certainly wasn’t nonchalant at the appearing, but he was less terrified than at the first appearing of Kuriosagapa. Pappas said nothing and stared in wonder.

“Greetings, James,” said the angel. “You ministered well to the young lady. Peace now, to you both, on this remembrance night of the Savior’s birth. Go and rest now. Much is transpiring,” and then in a flash, disappeared.

Pappas eyes grew wide at the lasts statement. He immediately got tears in his eyes and said to himself, “The best Christmas Eve ever.” He stumbled back into his apartment and fell into bed. He fell into a deep sleep and did not awaken until seven o’clock on Christmas morning.

70

As he awakened, Pappas realized, “Wait. Who shot who? Was she saying that Cohen and McConnell shot the lieutenant and the pastor’s wife?” He called her then.

“Good morning, Karen, how are you feeling?” he asked.

“Oh Jim, I did not sleep well but I’m glad you called,” she said.

“I gotta ask you, Karen, because I’m confused. Last night you said Menendez’s wife and the lieutenant were shot, but by who? Did Cohen or McConnell shoot them?”

“What?” she said, a little more loudly. “No, no, no. They shot some of the men who were attacking us, that’s who they shot. I think. It was dark, I mean, and I was so scared. The main attacker shot Sophia Menendez right up against her, and was going to shoot others, I think. I don’t know who shot the lieutenant, but it was one of the attackers, I am sure.”

“Bob and Mindy intervened and that’s when the gunfight really began,” she continued. “I don’t know where the state police officers went or the governor’s security team—that was four other officers—I think they shielded the governor. When the state officers came out of the dark, they had circled around I think, to get a better approach. At least that’s what I’m thinking. And it was a large force of attackers, I mean, more than three or four. We were going to be overwhelmed. Also, Pastor Moniz tried to step in too. I’m glad he wasn’t shot.”



“Thanks, Karen. I wanted to get it straight, at least as much as you can remember. I’m sure the cops will interview you too.”

“They did last night, the state cops, but they said they would get back to me once they got the site stabilized and the rest of the attackers in custody,” she went said.

“What happened to the rest of the assault force?” he asked, thinking using a phrase like assault force was over-played but not knowing what else to call them.

“They all laid down their weapons and were carted off to jail someplace, I assumed. The governor then was going around comforting people, including me,” Karen added.

Then Pappas interrupted her. “Karen, something else happened after you left my apartment to go home.”

“What?” she asked. He didn’t answer her right away. She asked, “Jim, are you still there? What else happened?”

“Um, that angel appeared right in front of me,” he said, quietly.

“What? And you didn’t call me right away? Did he talk or say something to you?” She was excited now.

“Look I don’t want to tell you on the phone, but I have to go to work. Can you meet me for coffee after work? Don’t you have to go to work too? Wait, it’s Christmas! Neither of us has to go to work,” he said.

“You’re babbling Jim, how about you come over here and I’ll have coffee ready for you.”

“Yow. It’s Christmas, I forgot. Merry Christmas, Karen. Yes, I’ll be over in a half hour.”

“Bring me a breakfast burrito. No, you don’t have to do that, nothing will be open. But come on over when you’re ready.”

“Alright, on my way.”

As he drove out of his apartment complex, he thought, *I wish I could get her something for Christmas.* The idea had not occurred to him before now, and no sooner had he thought it, he passed a Chinese restaurant that was actually open. He pulled in before the thought came to him, *who wants Chinese food on Christmas morning?* He chuckled and said, “This has been a strange week, so I might as well see what they have.”

Expecting to see nothing but moo goo gai pan, Jim was very surprised to see an oddly decorated Christmas display in a glass case that had a simple sign which read, “Christmas Bun.” There was a pleasant, smiling older Asian woman behind the counter who said, “Happy Christmas! You like buns.”

Jim laughed and asked, “Are these for Christmas?”

She answered, “Yes, and you first customer, Happy Christmas, you like?”

He looked at the display case carefully and saw that there was a lovely variety of buns, but only two or three of each kind. He asked her, “Ma’am, what are they made of?”

She became very serious and answered, “My buns have pineapple, red bean paste, lotus bean paste, coconut, char siu, taro, pumpkin or . . . how you say, stem buns.” He assumed she meant steamed buns.

“Wow,” Jim said. “I will take one of each,” which made the woman smile.

“Yes sir, Happy Christmas,” and she began to very carefully pull one bun each out of the case and delicately place them in a beautiful box which had a Santa Claus on it. It looked like the woman had made the box herself, it was so pretty. She placed each bun carefully into the box and wove tissue paper over and around each pastry. Then she tied a green ribbon around the box, presented it to him and smiled. “Eight dollars, sir, please.”

He gave her a twenty-dollar bill and refused the change, said “Merry Christmas,” and exited the deli with a smile on his face. It wasn’t a burrito, breakfast or



otherwise, but it would be a memorable breakfast that neither Jim nor Karen would ever forget.

* * * * *

Jim and Karen sat down at her little kitchen table and opened the box. She had presented a small coffee pot, two cups with saucers, a cream pitcher, and a sugar bowl, with two small spoons laid out neatly on napkins. *Man*, he thought, *class.*

Karen looked into the box and sat back. “Merry Christmas, Jim,” she smiled as she looked at him. She pulled a tissue off one bun and smelled it. “Umm,” she said. “Where did you get these? They look wonderful.”

“I passed the Red Dragon Chinese place, and it was open. Amazing, isn’t it? I didn’t think chow mein or General Tso’s chicken would be appropriate for Christmas morning, so I got one of each of what the lady referred to as Christmas Bun. I think they’re fresh.”

“Isn’t that neat! This is very special. You take a bite first,” she said.

“Being careful, are we?” he said.

Karen’s face darkened and she said, “Tell me what happened.”

He stayed quiet for a moment, and looked at the box of buns, pulling one and sniffing it. “Smells good,” he said but did not take a bite yet.

He looked at her seriously and said, “Just as you drove away, there was this . . . warm light of some kind, then there he was. Looking at me.” He went silent then. Looking past Karen, like he was seeing something even then.

“And Karen, he looked as we saw him that first time. Tall. Incredibly . . .” pausing again, “Majestic. Clean. And this time I felt something more . . . he felt so powerful. He didn’t move a muscle . . . Do angels have muscles? He was so still and erect and strong looking.

“He didn’t look around at all, just looked at me. It wasn’t staring. It was like . . .” Jim thought a minute. “Did you ever see *Field of Dreams*?”

Karen laughed for a split second and said, “What a digression! Yes, I saw that movie. Loved it. Especially at the end when Joe Jackson presents Costner’s dad to him.”

“Yes!” Jim moved back in the chair. “Then! Can you recall the look on Ray Liotta’s face when Costner first met him on the new baseball field? That was the look on the angel’s face. Exactly!”

Karen mused over this. She said, “Hmm, somehow that seems like a come-down for an angel. But I know what you mean. It was a serene, probing look. Do you think?”

“Right,” Pappas said. “And it was like he was looking *into* me, and I stood there frozen. Then he said ‘Greetings, James.’” He stopped there. “What was his name that he told us? Kurio . . . something?”

She said, “Kuriosagapa.”

“Right. Then he said,” and he looked away, embarrassed, “You ministered well to the young lady.” He glanced at her and he saw the warmest, most kind expression on a face he had ever seen.

“He called me a ‘young lady’?”

Jim nodded his head up and down. She smiled again.

*Damn, girl,* he quickly thought*, when this ‘young lady’ flashes that smile at me . . .* but he didn’t say it.

He collected himself and then went on, “Then the angel said, ‘Peace now, to you both, on this remembrance night of the Savior’s birth. Go and rest now.’” Pappas stopped again, thinking.



“Then, this burned into me, he said, ‘Much is transpiring,’ and then it was like the light grew for a second and he was gone. But Karen, that’s not all.” And again, he got tears in his eyes and wiped them with his hands. “Karen, his accent changed.”

She looked from her coffee up at him, “What?”

“No lie, Karen. His accent changed when he said, ‘much is transpiring.’ And I had the distinct feeling that it was deliberate. As if when he was talking to me, it was in my language. But when he said the words, ‘much is transpiring’ it was in a manner of his own way of speaking, like he was transported, for a second, to another place.”

Karen sipped her coffee. “Much is transpiring,” she repeated quietly.

Then she spoke, “*This wisdom for you—the mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust.”* She sat alert and said, “Jim, that *was* in a different accent. I had forgotten that detail.”

They sat for a moment, enjoying another bun. He watched her, waiting for her interpretation of what the angel had said. Then she said, “Let’s go for a Christmas morning ride together.”

“I love it. Yes,” he laughed, and then got up, did a dance and started singing, “*We gotta get outta this place. If it’s the last thing we ever do!”*

She looked at him quizzically, “Where did that come from?”

“Animals,” he said. “Sixty-five. It was in a movie too,” and laughed.

She stood up and said, “Let’s get outta this place.”

Pappas and Asnat seemed to feed each other. Though they had been friends for only a short while, they somehow seemed to give strength to each other. Cohen and McConnell were a different story.

After the Christmas Eve attack and defeat of the *Demônios* team, Bob Cohen and Mindy McConnell were together often. It wasn't romantic. It was therapeutic. She had now shot two bad guys, or so she kept designating them to herself. She was shaken badly enough after the incident at the New Beginnings Fellowship site that she had refused to let herself think that the bad guy had family. Maybe he had been lured into the Brazilian drug cartel. Maybe he was a lifelong victim.

Now, she had participated in a quasi-military operation, or occurrence, and had shot a second person—yeah, he was also a bad guy. She had felt a cold urge to pull the Baretta trigger and three rounds planted themselves in that rifleman, and down he went. Could have been dead. She was glad it was at night and she couldn't really see his face. And she wasn't so depressed this time, more amazed that the event had taken her mindset to a new region in her spirit. She could do that. She could kill.

Journalism had conditioned her for a sort of cut-throat ethic when it came to a good story. She had grown to feel few twinges of conscience when it came to good reporting. But now that cool, ruthless objectivity had spilled over into the use of a firearm when a situation called for it. Maybe that capability had always been there.

She pondered. She brooded. She was quiet. And the strange thing was, Bob Cohen got it. She would sit in front of him, staring through him. Quiet. And he would break the silence with a one-liner, sometimes snarky but always spot-on. He knew what she was thinking and feeling and he didn't press or preach or do the smarmy therapist thing. He just knew.

It was a strange set of events. The attack on Christmas Eve, the thwarting of that attack, the presence of so many official people who all witnessed exactly what happened. Cohen and McConnell were not ushered down to police headquarters or even asked to give any kind of legal statement. Not yet anyway. It seemed that



their roles in protecting the governor, the crowd of people, Pastor Menendez, and the Air Guard pilot, were all that was needed to place them in a category of community hero.

* * * * *

Governor Lucille Grimley was herself quite shaken by the Christmas Eve attack, and humiliated because, as it turned out, it wasn't even about her. She just happened to be there. But she felt she had stood up to the attackers, minimally at least, and was glad the two journalist-commandoes had shown up when they did, that the Air Guard pilot had intervened, although was wounded, and that the state troopers had been able to loop around in the dark. She was glad that things had spun out as they had. She felt little to no sympathy for the deaths of two of the assailants and the others who were injured. The governor was playing her role to make sure the rest of the captured *Demônios* members were thoroughly prosecuted. She even allowed herself the indulgence of imagining that this might end the *Demônios* insurgence into her state and bring a downturn to their infamous trade. "Well, probably not that," she admitted to herself.

Her deeper concern these days was centered on her daughter. Maegan had changed. Lucille knew her gifted architect-daughter had gotten religion, but now, after the Hit-G phenomena, Maegan was becoming manic, or so Lucille thought. She was cranking out conceptual drawings for multiple church facilities. Yes, they were brilliant, the governor had to admit, but this new phase seemed psychedelic to her.

She worried about Maegan's stability and, of course, her future. She knew architects were often esoteric, but these days her daughter seemed unreachable. Lucille had never wished for her daughter to become the Pablo Picasso of architecture. Maegan was smart, real smart. But to the extent that Lucille had perused the drawings Maegan was doing, she felt her daughter was imagining buildings that were so incredible that she wondered what congregation would want a building like one of these—or could afford one? And yet Maegan was relentless and even happy now. She felt she was onto something.

* * * * *

Maegan Grimley sat at her computer in her apartment. It had two twenty-seven-inch monitors and she loved the inspiration she was now feeling. Her regular work was receiving her due attention too, but now on her off hours she would conceptualize a new church building first as a floorplan and then she would design it in general detail—capacity, needs for room types, square footages, sanctuary configuration, HVAC needs. Second, she would imagine the external appearance and draw that, from four angles. Then she would set to work on the engineering specs, wiring, plumbing, flooring details, interior flash: lighting features, exposed beams, even some built-in artwork. Finally, she would calculate estimated costs and specify cost-cutting options for change orders such as doors, windows, trim, security, kitchen, office accoutrements, and add-ons.

Each church facility came out of her head to be planted on a concrete slab. She envisioned none with cellars, though all twenty sites were now just that. Her designs were all of different sizes because while she obviously wasn't intimately acquainted with the people from all eighteen disappeared churches or the two synagogues, she knew generally what their memberships were. She had not yet heard about the strange displacement mystery of all twenty Hit-G congregations at a uniform and exact 150,000 cubic feet. But she designed room for some numerical growth for each church, having fun imagining how each might or could grow. She felt some simple pride in her own newfound optimism.

That first New Beginnings drawing that Pastor Moniz had once imagined alive was now dormant, and Maegan had forgotten about it, too.

* * * * *

With reluctance, the Cavern Fellowship group of pastors felt compelled to take up the question of security. It seemed counterintuitive for professed followers of Jesus Christ to bear arms. The general question which haunted many of the pastors and their leaders was, "Why should we have to even think about armed security? We are not a threat to anyone." Nevertheless, recent events seemed to shunt that sympathy back to an earlier era.

Twice, their company had been attacked and yes, by a single group which now seemed at least to have been incapacitated. But who else is lurking around, looking for a chance to attack them? And who knows if the *Demônios Elevados* were done



for, or merely driven into reorganization mode? The Cavern Fellowship churches were still, of course, all without buildings, and while their shared theological outlook made that spiritually irrelevant, they still felt more vulnerable. So discussions had begun, beneath the media radar so far, about quietly organizing a security service.

Pastor Stephen Menendez was the immediate focus and his wife, Sophia, had taken a bullet through the shoulder in defense of her husband. But the pastors' concern was wider than merely protecting one couple. They realized how vulnerable any of them might be to attack, and their congregations as well, since they were meeting in many unsecure places. They all felt keenly that had Cohen, McConnell, and Philipsburg not been on site, armed and aggressive, a greater tragedy could have occurred on Christmas Eve. As they had analyzed that evening, it was clear that the governor's security team were prepared to shield her mainly, if not exclusively. And the detachment of state police, while well-intentioned, were both out of place, ill-equipped, and devoid of any intelligence briefings.

Once again, with great discretion, Father Frank Portacomaro offered his chapel as a meeting place for the pastors, who were now becoming his friends. He knew they were nervous, and he certainly knew that most of them were reluctant to organize any clandestine security effort. But they had to confront the overwhelming reality of Christmas Eve. It was hard to argue with facts. Praying about it more hardly seemed enough, or responsible. There had been entire families at that service, in full danger. Everyone agreed that they were woefully unprepared for that attack, and it was not even remotely anticipated. No one was downplaying the dramatic need that something must be done. No one was second-guessing the state authorities. The governor herself had publicly said, "We will not be intimidated by the irrational hostility of an infamous criminal organization."

Without surprise, Pastor Moniz offered to moderate the one-hour evening get-together, and Father Portacomaro and Father Clark were standing by, in support. With meetings like this, less of a divide was felt between their vocational Catholicism and their clergy colleagues. They almost seemed like they were all on a wartime footing; in fact, historically, some of the barriers between Protestants and Catholics diminish in the face of a greater enemy than each other. Whether their bishop was in agreement with this, they did not know, and did not seem to care. It was feeling more and more like war.

And little could they know just how real that was becoming.

* * * * *

*Screegion was snarking at its four designated stinktroops. "We need more killings. That's the agenda, stinkers. Let's put our sorry minds together and come up with something more dramatic, shall we?" The stinktroops were not about to disagree. "Maybe we can sow some shitsmell among them tonight?" One stinktroop barked, "Yeah ScreegionBoss, that's the ticket!" And off they all flew, almost like an in-flight formation of dive bombers . . . towards Santa Maria Chapel.*

* * * * *

State Trooper Avon Duvall had not been on duty on Christmas Eve, a fact which he regretted. But he certainly had heard the full reporting from his fellow state police officers who were there, and he had been involved in processing the next day of some of the perps.

This evening he was on duty, and he casually drove by Santa Maria Chapel and noticed several cars parked in the little lot. "Hmm," he thought. "It's a Monday night. Nothing usually going on here on Monday nights. I think I'll pop in and freak them out!" he chuckled to himself.

He parked his RAM and walked to the main door, which would not open. Locked. "Odd," he thought, and he quietly knocked. A moment later the door opened and Father Frank saw him and smiled. "Can I help you, officer?" with an almost too sweet tone.

"Hi Father, I was driving by and noticed cars here. You don't usually have anything going on, on Monday nights, so I thought I would check in. These are strange times, yes?"

The priest thought for a second, and said, "Come on in Avon. We would all be glad to see you." Then he locked the door behind him.



Duvall wondered out loud, "Who is 'all'?"

"You know them all, officer. And you might be able to advise on tonight's topic of discussion."

Duvall went to the back of the sanctuary, waved at a couple of the pastors, and sat down quietly so as not to disturb the discussion. The priest joined the edge of the group and winked at Pastor Moniz and said, "Everything's okay. He's just patrolling and thought he would stop in."

*One of the four unnamed stinktroops, hovering overhead in the sanctuary, snorted something dark green, goopy, and steaming out of what was some kind of orifice in the middle of its head. He aimed towards the group and then belly laughed to himself.*

Simultaneous to a faint putrid smell in the room, Randy Juarez said, "Hey! We didn't invite anyone outside our fellowship for this chat." Frowns spread from face to face.

Pastor Jim Zorowski then piped up, "I agree. We're not causing any trouble. What do we need a state trooper watchdogging us for? Can't we have a private get-together without State interference?"

Then, as the corporate nervousness started to cascade, Pastors Whittier and Ethan stood up as if about to leave.

Then Victor Moniz called out, "Brothers, relax for a minute, please. Officer, let me tell you why we're here. We are discussing if there are any proactive steps we could take, representing our congregations, to strengthen our feeling of safety and preparedness. Surely you can understand."

The trooper stood and put his hand up, "Reverends, I assure you I stopped by as a friendly curiosity. As I said to the good priest, this church doesn't usually have anything on Monday nights and there were a bunch of cars outside. I thought to make a friendly stop-in. I certainly appreciate your need to talk together about what has happened. In fact, I would have been surprised if talks like this did not happen. I am not spying for the State Police. If you want me to leave, I am glad to. Good evening to you all, and good luck!"

Moniz then stopped him and said, “Officer, we are not planning anything illegal or any insurrection at all.” Moniz continued, “In fact, maybe you might listen to us some and see if you have any ideas? Unofficial, of course,” and he smiled. It had a calming effect—everything was above board and there was no subterfuge to the evening. Juarez, Zorowski, Whittier, and Ethan all slowly reseated themselves. They still had cold looks on their faces but were willing to let Pastor Moniz negotiate the officer’s presence.

“As we were saying,” Moniz went on, “Would a trained and certified team make sense, that would randomly rotate between our fellowships, at the times they are meeting?”

“Wouldn’t it make better sense for each fellowship to have its own team?” asked Juarez.

“That would be better if each church had enough willing and trained people, but I don’t know if they do,” commented Whittier.

“A single team would bring us all together more,” Bishop Jones added. “These are strange times and more connectedness might not be bad.”

Moniz added, “There are many questions if we were to organize something. Who serves on a team, assuming there is just one? What exactly is the mission? Are there any finances involved? What training do we get? From whom do we get it?”

Juarez interrupted but continued, “What if there is an altercation? How do we communicate with leaders in a church if there is something suspicious brewing? How soon do we contact police?”

Pastor Zorowski then said, “Brothers, I am going to guess that none of us would serve on this team. Not in our job description.” This garnered a few chuckles. “Plus, we’re busy with our job description in our congregations.”

Father Frank then commented, outside the group, from the back, “I hate to use the C word, but what about a committee to work on this?”



Moniz said, “Seems reasonable. But first, do we all agree that a project like this is really needed? Are the police enough to protect us?” Duvall shifted in his pew.

Marty Clark stood up at that point, “I wish our police, local and state, had the resources to cover all our congregations, all the time. But I am going to assume they do not. They do the best they can with what they’ve got, and I am thankful for them. And their responses are usually good. But we are a bunch of churches that meet all the time, and there’s no way they can patrol us all for every activity.

Now Duvall stood up too and said, “Father, you are correct. The state police are always available and ready for response. But in this district, we are only twenty officers, and believe it or not, we are busy on every shift. As to Santa Fe police, I know they are busy as well. And I am sure you are aware that the ‘defund the police’ movement has taken root in our state. Santa Fe has 85,000 people and it is growing. Law enforcement is stretched thin as is.”

Moniz now asked, “Officer, can you shed any light on the future of the *Demônios Elevados*? To keep things in perspective, they have been our only threat since we all lost our buildings.”

Duvall said, “I can only say that our intelligence assets are fully active and our district—under recent orders this week from the governor’s office—is on full alert for any new information. That’s all I can say this evening.”

“So officer, you’re not telling us to relax, that there is nothing to be worried about?” said Juarez and then laughed, looking around expecting others to laugh too. None did.

“Recent happenings would keep me from saying anything like that, pastor,” Duvall responded, gently. “In fact, I think the idea of setting up a security team is a good one, so long as it is kept strictly within federal and New Mexico statutes. I would advise not publicizing it, and keeping it strictly monitored by you gentlemen. Santa Fe certainly doesn’t need a new force of gunslingers on the street.” He immediately regretted saying that, but Father Portacomaro jumped in, “Indeed, we do not. And we will not sanction such a thing, I can assure you. But if the Brazilian gang is still active, and I can only imagine that it is, we need to become more watchful and intentional.” Moniz noted his use of the pronoun “we.”

*Screegion, with what resembled a talon, motioned evilly to the four stinktroops and they deftly posted themselves at the four corners of the room. It had some scheme in mind to bring disruption to bear. Their timeless goal was always simple: destroy, or devise pathways to destruction; nothing more.*

*But at that moment, a single angel showed himself to the five of them. He appeared, in the spirit realm, in the center of them all and directly next to Screegion, at its back—perfectly still. Unseen by any until now, Kuriosagapa wore a weapon. It resembled a broad blade, large, sheathed. He placed his hand on the hilt and drew it halfway out. It blazed with an unearthly gleam. The stinktroops screeched and scurried away. However, these creatures were not fleeing out of fear of a more desperate evil. They fled at the appearance of pure righteousness. Kuriosagapa needed to utter no word and he needed no dramatic gesture. He simply half-drew his blade. It was enough. The room was peaceful again.*

Victor Moniz noticed something. He looked around while others had broken into small conversations. He sniffed. He said to himself*, that smell, again.* And just like that, it was gone and a very subtle and much nicer fragrance dissipated over the group. Stephen Menendez, who had said nothing throughout the meeting, smelled it too and looked at Moniz. They both smiled. “More going on here than meets the eye, brother,” he said very quietly to Moniz.

72

Sophia Menendez was healing, the security team was organizing and had begun careful patrols with no incidents, and Governor Grimley was becoming more conflicted. Maegan Grimley was almost in a design-trance and her mother was concerned. But she seemed cheerful and otherwise of a normal demeanor. They spent as much time together as the governor could afford to invest in family time. The Hit-G holes remained undisturbed, a strange thing to Jim Pappas’ eye, since some erosion or ground shifting would be expected, now some six months after the disappearance of the twenty buildings. Trooper Avon Duvall had also noticed this strange stability and wondered about it too.

Nothing had been heard from *Demônios Elevados*, and no intelligence was learned. So far as Santa Fe, New Mexico was concerned, their chapter was closed. But the



drug fentanyl was showing up on the streets now, and in the shielded form of normal-looking pills. Three people had expired in the emergency room of Presbyterian Santa Fe Medical Center in the last two weeks. They had taken what seemed to be normal meds but were disguised as fentanyl, causing overdoses. Santa Fe detectives were investigating this new twist in street narcotics and it wasn’t long before *Demônios* was again suspected.

* * * * *

Bob Cohen was routinely posting whatever news bits interested him, although he was restless. Mindy McConnell had been recalled to CNN Center in Atlanta for consultation and to give briefings to her superiors. She complied with their summons and was there for a week before returning to what had become the most interesting news site in the southwest. She was glad to get back. She was still deeply shaken at being drawn into violent events. But without anyone calling it coaching, she had a growing appreciation for Cohen’s steady spirit. At random and unplanned times, he listened while she talked and processed what had happened. She also was processing herself, and subconsciously they were each processing themselves as a team. They were not dating and each would have angrily dismissed such adolescent talk.

Following supper one Tuesday night, after he had watched *The Matrix* for something like the tenth time, he was bored.

He grabbed his phone and texted Mindy: **Fancy a beer? I’m bored.**

She had been back from Atlanta for two days, looked at her phone and texted him: **That desperate eh, desperado?**

To which he replied: **So, interested?**

She texted back: **Sure. Want me to drive over?**

To which he replied: **Yeah.**

So that’s what she did and in twenty minutes gave a short knock on his RV door. “C’mon in,” Cohen responded.

She climbed in and found him on his little couch, watching CNN. He said, “Cold one’s in the fridge.”

“Really know how to charm a lady, don’t you?” she said, but opened the refrigerator and brought out a tall can of beer that she did not recognize. “Is this good?” she asked.

“Give it a try. They’re a new brand I’ve been test-driving. I kind of like them.”

She sat down in his desk chair and put her feet up on the desk and cautiously tried the beer. “Not bad,” she observed.

“You know, these CNN dorks actually stumble onto something interesting once in a while,” he smirked.

“Oh?” she said, acting surprised.

“There’s this story about how bad drugs are being packaged and masqueraded as normal, over-the-counter medications and moved around easily and then sold secretly. I thought it was a good story and your people are working on it.”

Mindy replied, “I heard some people in Atlanta talking about it and I sat in and listened. Apparently, this thing is growing and it isn’t just in one place. It’s in a bunch of areas. Seems like no sooner does someone get a handle on the illicit drug trade when the drug lords change it up with a new angle. They need to go away.”

Back to Cohen, tossing back his third tall one, “That ain’t gonna happen while we’re living, m’lady. As long as there’s cash and power on the table, anyway.”

“Uh huh,” she quietly grunted. “Bob, can I ask you something?”

“Shoot,” he said and then, “I mean, go ahead.”

“That’s just it. I shot people, Bob. Dammit,” she blurted out. “Do you ever recover from that?” She stared intently at him.



“Hmm,” he thought. “You’re never going to be precisely the same person you were before that day when we saved Pastor Menendez, the first time. I’m sorry. It just changes a person.”

McConnell said nothing and looked at the door.

“But that doesn’t mean you’re going to be sad for the rest of your life either,” he went on. “You grow a little bit of GI—government issue—toughness. You didn’t ask for the thing to happen but you stepped up, Mindy.” He actually had warmth in his voice.

She looked at him and said, “That’s right. I did not want that day to happen like it did. But we both felt like we had to go over there, didn’t we? And then when push came to shove, we just acted. We could easily have been shot ourselves—it could have gone a whole different route.”

“That’s right Mindy. It could have. But it didn’t. So, we move on. We learn, we grieve the loss of our innocence,” and he looked at the floor like he was looking at a dead animal.

“The first time I killed a man, it took me a while to regain my balance. I kept waking up at night and thinking about if the guy had a wife, or kids, or parents. I found out later he had a brother. That brother tracked me down later and tried to kill me.”

“What happened with him?” Mindy asked.

Bob said nothing.

“You shot him too, didn’t you?” she asked.

Bob still said nothing. He got up and opened the refrigerator and got two more tall ones out, giving one to her.

“He found me on a ridgeline in Mexico and tried to slice me open with a machete. We wrestled. We were alone. I threw him off the ridgeline. He fell on a rock about forty feet down. Other SEALs retrieved his body. Dude was so dead. My CO called it throwing meat.

“And there were others, too. But then I retired from the Navy. Mindy, I still think about those guys. All that changed me but I knew that going into the business. I signed up for it. You didn’t. But like I said, you stepped up. You showed me something.”

“I’m glad you approve, sailor,” she flatly said.

“It isn’t approval, Miss CNN, it is just a common thing we feel together now. You can’t really explain it to someone who hasn’t had that experience. Killing another human is all easy to theorize or moralize about until you’re faced with a kill-or-be-killed situation.”

Mindy started to quietly weep, then stood up to leave.

“Hold on,” he said, gently. “Don’t leave yet, I don’t want you to leave. We got like a little moment going here,” and he looked at the floor again not believing that those words came out of his mouth. Cohen wasn’t used to sensitive, meaningful moments with other people, let alone women.

She stopped and then turned and said, “Damn it, sailor, just hold me for a minute.” She raised her voice. “Please. I’m sure it’s in the US Navy manual someplace.”

Cohen did as he was told. He got up and put his arms around her, gently pushed her head against his shoulder and then said, “To be honest lady, I was proud of you on both occasions. I have served with lots of bad-ass soldier-types. But if I am in any situation again, like where we were, I would want you covering my six.” He looked into her eyes now, smiled, and released her.

Mindy stepped back, then grabbed him again. She wasn’t finished being consoled.

73

Maegan Grimley had completed preliminary conceptual drawings for sixteen churches and one synagogue and was beginning detail specification sheets for each. That left three congregations for which she had begun nothing. Of course, nobody had yet asked her to do anything for them, she knew well enough. She



looked at the list of Cavern Fellowship file folders—seventeen so far—and sat back in her desk chair. She was proud but also still mystified at herself, at what had come over her.

Maegan had always been an energetic and committed person when it came to her own creativity, even back to childhood when she would write little poems and then decorate each one with a small illustration. But now, well, it was something more. She was experiencing a strange blend of clarity and yet some depression; inspiration and yet confusion as to where these ideas were coming from; gladness at focusing on multiple worship spaces and yet feeling clueless as to why.

* * * * *

Governor Lucille Grimley sat at her desk that morning and couldn’t get a stupid musical lyric out of her head, “in Birmingham they love the gov’nuh.” She always hated that song, especially the next line, “now Watergate doesn’t bother me, does your conscience bother you?” Looking out the window she said to herself, “How can songwriters be so stupid? Anyway, that song was a long, long time ago.”

She picked up her cell phone and with no forethought, tapped her daughter’s number. Maegan answered.

“Hi, Mom, what’s up? Is something wrong?”

Lucille laughed. Maegan was always naturally suspicious. “No dear, just wondering how you are today? I’m sure you’re busy but I wondered if you had time for a quick lunch? I’ve got three meetings in the afternoon but I sure would like to see my daughter.”

“I’d love to,” Maegan answered. “Do you want me to come to your office?”

“No, no, I’ll come by and pick you up. How about eleven thirty?” Lucille suggested.

“Great Mom. See you then,” and she clicked off.

Lucy chuckled to herself, “If I treated people like that, this would be a one-term administration,” and pulled herself up to her computer screen and scanned for the next thing on her morning list.

* * * * *

The governor’s dark blue GMC Yukon pulled up to Maegan’s office at eleven thirty. Her personal security detail today consisted of a driver and a personal guard. She knew her driver, Carlos, carried two firearms. The guard, Bill, had a small machine pistol in full view. He was sensitive to her feelings and didn’t have it on his lap but it was easily retrievable in a holster compartment on the door. Since Christmas Eve both Carlos and Bill had become more watchful.

As they pulled up to Maegan’s office entrance, she slid down her window in the back seat as Maegan came walking out. Bill stepped out, grabbed the pistol, smiled, and held the door for the governor’s daughter to get in next to her mother. Maegan did so, happily, but saw the pistol and her expression immediately darkened. Her mother saw it and said, “Sometimes I wish we lived in the last century when security wasn’t so necessary.”

Maegan said, “Right, then we would all be wearing our own six-shooters, Mom,” and they both smirked.

The Yukon drove off to the previously directed restaurant, The Skillet. It wasn’t the most elegant eatery in town but it struck the governor as a random destination to grab a quick bite with Maegan.

They seated themselves and Bill sat at the bar. Carlos remained with the parked vehicle. A server came over, queried for beverages, and handed them menus. They both homed in on the specials and indicated to the server that they would order quickly, “Brussel Sprouts,” said the mom and “Carne Asada Taco,” from the daughter. “Very good,” the server replied and was off.

“That was simple,” Maegan noted and scanned the establishment. It was about half full of lunchtime diners and held a relaxed feel. She sighed and sat back in her chair.

“Tell me what you’re working on, favored daughter,” said Lucille.



“Only daughter,” she said, “But thank you, I’ll take it. They’ve got me doing work on the new Wells Fargo branch. It’s primarily a corporate-controlled design with a small flair of *suroeste* to the exterior. Not real exciting but, hey, it’s a job,” and she laughed.

“Your day job is not what I meant,” Lucille said.

“Oh, you mean the other stuff,” Maegan said quietly but smiled.

“Mmm hmm,” she heard back.

“Mom, I don’t know what’s going on. I am working on seventeen facilities now, late into each night. I can’t get to sleep until I finish a phase, one church or another. It’s like an addiction but it’s not bad. It’s not.” She showed her phone to her mother and one 3-D rendering glowed.

“Impressive,” said the governor. “But there aren’t those kinds of trees around here, I don’t think. And what is that—a pool, a fountain? My goodness, these churches must have lots of money—in your mind, I mean,” and she laughed.

“Sure, there are trees like that around here, Mom. You need to get out more,” said the architect.

“Seventeen. Geez, Maegan!” said Lucille with true surprise. “You’re a design machine. Why all this energy?” She thought for a second, “Seventeen. I thought there were twenty churches that disappeared. Why are you focusing on some and leaving out others? Anyway, damn, girl, get a life.” She wasn’t really criticizing her daughter but she was alarmed at the intensity.

Maegan had not told her mother or anyone else about the strange drawing she had found in the night, which was still being kept by Victor and Rosaria Moniz. She had not thought about it much, but in this moment she realized that it had been the inspiration for her work, although she didn’t know how or why.

“I know it seems crazy, Mom, but somehow it isn’t. And there were eighteen churches and two synagogues. I get to a resting point in the process, with one facility and then a flash of ideas comes into my head for the next one. I don’t know when I’ve felt so . . . mission driven.”

“Will these churches pay you a commission for this work, Maegan?” asked the governor.

“Mom, they don’t even know about this. In fact, I don’t know if any of them are even pondering rebuilding their churches yet. I know it’s been a while, but I think everyone is still in shock, if that’s possible. My own pastor knows I’ve been drawing but even he hasn’t asked me to do this. Our other building . . .” and she stopped.

“I know,” Lucille said, “it was a hard loss for you.”

“It was hard for everyone, and still is, but I loved that project. I guess I want to move on and do it again. And I still haven’t heard anyone suggest any new explanations for what happened.”

“I’m sorry dear,” said Lucille, “The drug cartel has been more on my mind, especially since Christmas. How is Pastor Charlie doing with all this?”

Maegan looked at her mother. An inquiry about her pastor, even with the strange and unprecedented happenings of the past year, seemed unusual. In fact, she didn’t know her Mom would have even remembered her pastor’s name.



Lucille immediately detected her daughter’s skepticism and laughed. “Fear not, I am not your pastor’s enemy, Maegan. In fact, I may end up being his friend. That strange IRS letter they all got; I’ve got my AG looking into that nonsense. We might be able to help these churches.”

“That would be good. But, I mean, it’s not like these fellowships have much in the way of assets now. My church has some money in their accounts but with no address anymore, um, what are they going to take? Or how are they going to track down anyone to tax them?” Maegan asked.

“Right,” said Lucille, “And that is exactly the tact we’re taking. ‘You can’t take from someone what he doesn’t have.’”

At that moment, Bill came over from the bar and said, deliberately with calmness, “Madam Governor, Carlos feels it would be good to get back.”

Maegan and her mother had finished their lunch and noticed nothing amiss. “Sure,” said Lucille, and she and Maegan got up to leave. As Bill went to take care of the bill, he leaned over and whispered to the governor, “Carlos saw a suspicious vehicle pass by three times. He thinks it’s time to get back to the office.” The governor immediately went into alert mode but didn’t want to alarm her daughter. They exited The Skillet, climbed into the waiting Yukon, which was shortly met by a second identical Yukon, and they headed back to Maegan’s building.

“That was a strange route, Carlos,” Maegan noted but the driver shrugged and said, “Standard operating procedure, ma’am,” and Maegan thought nothing more of it. She hugged her mom as she got out at her own office, and said, “Talk to you tonight, Mom. Thank you for lunch!”

The governor smiled and said, “Love you, I’ll call you tonight.”

The Yukon sped off again heading directly to the capitol and the governor was escorted safely back to her office within ten minutes. She asked Carlos and Bill to step into her office. “What’s up?” as she sat back at her desk.

"I saw the same vehicle pass the restaurant three times. Probably nothing, but it was definitely the same SUV," said Carlos. "It was a Suburban. I think we can't be too careful these days, ma'am."

"Thank you, Carlos, for a sharp eye. And you too, Bill," she said as they exited her office. Carlos had given Bill the heads up through their radio equipped ear buds and had immediately summoned a back-up team. The second Yukon was there in three minutes. Nothing developed, so they all went on with a normal afternoon.

* * * * *

That evening, as Maegan sat at her computer with a hot cup of tea in front of her, she thought again about the one church that had disappeared for which she had not begun a new design. It was her own Southwest Evangelical Free Church. She wasn't absent-minded. She had not forgotten her own church or been driven into design mania for all the others for any particular reason. She wasn't getting back at Pastor Charlie for some subconscious reason; she loved the man. She had felt a hold in her spirit about her own church. It seemed to come from that night with the drawing. *Why,* she thought to herself, *is that drawing so important?* She knew that the Monizes held it in safekeeping. She knew, somehow, that they would not talk about its existence all over the place, but she also knew that Victor had shown it to a few others.

As she finished each rendering for each of the other churches, a thing that had become a joy for her, the visions for her own church kept nagging at her. The hole, so open and grotesquely raw and sad and empty. So yet unattended in the technical sector of her own mind. And then she remembered the drawing, that it had warmly glowed in the darkness that evening and that it had some script that no one seemed to recognize in the ID box space.

She kept on designing and now she was working on one of the synagogues. Her mind visualized its footprint to be larger than any of the other churches. That creativity just felt right. "I don't know why there needs to be two separate synagogues if they are united in the same beliefs," she mused aloud and kept working the mouse and keyboard.

74



State Trooper Avon Duvall was on patrol, driving on the Paseo De Peralta, in front of the New Mexico State Capitol complex. The state capitol was a glass-domed rotunda, surrounded by a beautifully landscaped area, with lots of art objects placed about in what they called the sculpture garden. It also housed its own art collection, of which everyone who worked in the complex was proud.

Duvall was in his usual on-duty mindset, alert and routinely observant. He was in his state Dodge RAM and always felt proud to be seen in it. As he cruised past the capitol, his eye caught a beautiful black Chevrolet Suburban driving a little slower than the rest of the traffic. He might almost have thought it to be a government vehicle but it was too clean, and it had rental tags.

"Hmm," he thought. Duvall slowed, let the Suburban pass him, put his turn signal on for a moment and then fell back several car lengths as if he was going to attend to some other business. He kept following the black SUV. Its windows were darkened, and he could not see the driver as it passed him.

The Suburban took a right on Don Gaspar Avenue, then a right on East De Vargas Street, and then another right on South Capitol Street, which brought it back to the other side of the capitol complex. As it slowly passed the capitol building, it took yet another right on Old Santa Fe Trail, which took it back to Paseo De Peralta once again. Duvall stayed back but did not lose sight of the Suburban, which drove this circuit three more times. Now Duvall was curious. It was not his general habit to jink with traffic violators but on this day, his curiosity was alerted.

Back on Paseo De Peralta, he flipped on his lights, sped up to just behind the suburban and hit his siren twice. The Suburban put on his flashers and immediately pulled over. Duvall pulled over behind him, radioed his own location to the state police dispatch, who immediately signaled for back-up. Duvall waited a moment and then got out of his cruiser, walking slowly to the driver's side of the Suburban. The window came down and the driver pleasantly said, "Good morning officer, have I done something wrong?" His hands were on the steering wheel.

"Good morning, sir, I am sorry to trouble you this morning. Could I see your driver's license please?"

"*Certamen* . . . I mean, *ciertamenta, amable official,*" he said very politely and retrieved his wallet from the dashboard, pulled his license out, and handed it to Duvall. Duvall did not miss his quick change of dialect. He had begun in what the officer sensed was Brazilian-Portuguese and quickly changed to Spanish. Duvall smiled, took the license, and asked the motorist to remain in his vehicle. Duvall could not see anyone else in the vehicle.

In his cruiser he entered the pertinent information and the system quickly responded with the license information. This driver was identified as Manuel G. López. Residence: 331 East Organ Avenue, Las Cruces, New Mexico. He was listed as five foot, five inches tall, his date of birth 03/01/67, date of issue 10/01/19 and license-expiration date 03/31/2027. Sex M, Eyes Bro, Endorsements None. Restrictions None. And there was his grinning face on the license, too. Nothing seemed amiss.

Duvall went back to the Suburban and asked Mr. López, "Could I ask you Mr. López, to step out of your vehicle for a moment? No problem but could you do that for me please? Routine."

The door opened and the man did as requested, closing the door behind him. He was careful to do it slowly, and to move carefully to the front of the SUV, waiting. Duvall saw an immaculately dressed man in a nicely tailored grey suit and wearing a black bow tie. His hair was closely groomed and he wore black glasses. He had a scholarly look about him. "*Officer,* I am an art dealer and I have been driving around, thinking about some of the pieces in the art collection here. I would love to purchase one or two from the *Colección de Arte*. Do you think they might make them available for purchase?"

At that moment, the back seat window rolled down and Duvall found himself staring into the maw of a large caliber automatic weapon, wielded by a hooded gunman. Knowing it would be difficult to aim a rifle-length weapon toward the ground, he intuitively fell to the street, rolled, and pulled his own weapon from his holster.

The state police back-up vehicle had arrived and was waiting behind Duvall's RAM. Two officers immediately got out with their weapons drawn. But at that moment, the window on the other side of the Suburban also came down and what looked



like a rocket-propelled grenade launcher stuck itself out. The projectile immediately fired and blew into a sculpture on the grounds of the capitol.

Mr. López adroitly jumped back into the Suburban and sped off before any of the officers could intervene. The distraction of the RPG worked. Duvall stood up, in shock, as did one of the back-up officers. The sculpture struck was a large hanging modern art piece, an easy target for the RPG. It exploded into pieces, which were scattered over the lawn and smoke wafted into air. Luckily, no pedestrians were nearby. The second back-up officer regained his composure and grabbed his partner, to get into their vehicle. Duvall said to them, "Go. I will radio this in and check inside the capitol."

The two men in the Suburban had planned this operation well. They sped down Don Gaspar Avenue for three blocks and quickly darted into the parking garage of a hotel. There, waiting, was a dirty, nondescript work van, marked Diego Plumbing. The back doors of the van opened, Mr. López and his accomplice jumped in, doors closing behind them, and the van exited the garage. Within moments, the Suburban exploded in a fire ball and began to burn.

* * * * *

Lucille Grimley's office complex in the capitol was on the opposite side of where the action happened on Paseo De Paralta. But in her office, she heard a faint noise and looked up. She summoned her assistant and asked, "What was that?" At the same moment, her two aides came into the office. Carlos snapped to her, "Madam Governor, would you please come with us? We will explain on the way to the security suite."

Grimley came out from behind her desk, grabbed her cell phone and her purse and followed them. They led her down the hall to an elevator. Her administrative assistant remained behind, locked the offices, and punched a code into a wall keypad to secure the area, then she ran to the elevator herself. The four of them, in a practiced protocol, and without emotion, rode the elevator to the basement, exited after a quick scan by the two aides, and led the governor and her assistant into a matrix of offices with heavy steel doors closing and locking behind them. Governor Grimley seated herself at a smaller but also elegant desk and picked up the receiver of a secure phone line to the FBI. Carlos dialed another phone to state

police headquarters. None of them knew precisely what had happened on Paseo De Peralta but everybody was on edge and no chances were being taken.

The governor asked, “What happened? Does anybody know?”

“We do not yet, Madam Governor,” Carlos replied, “But there was some kind of explosion in the art courtyard. State police were in pursuit of a vehicle of interest but lost it. Then there was a car explosion, we think the SUV in question, in the parking garage of the Hotel of the Sun. Had to be related. Police are all over the site as we speak. Whatever this was, it was well planned.”

“Damned *Demônios*,” the governor muttered.

*“Damned Demônios indeed, Madam Governor,” Screegion sarcastically mimicked her. The demon was squatting, in the spiritual realm, next to her. Its abdomen had swelled up and exuded some kind of dark excretion, which dripped off and evaporated into a purple vapor.*

* * * * *

It hadn’t been fifteen minutes into the whole event when Bob Cohen in his RV picked up the newsflash. He ran out to his Jeep and sped down to the center of Santa Fe as fast as he could. “This gets my attention,” he said aloud to himself. As usual, he jammed his pistol into his belt, holstered this time. He stuck his Santa Fe Day sign onto the dashboard.

* * * * *

Julio Hernández, a.k.a. Manuel López, with his RPG soldier, Sergio Sánchez, were in a safehouse outside of town, north of the city in the Las Campanas area, watching the local news channel. The Diego Plumbing van was in a large garage, being repainted by two soldiers. They were, in fact, Mexican-born and raised members of *Demônios Elevados* but they were called *afiliados,* affiliates, by their Brazilian partners. Julio and Sergio were cousins and had become moderately wealthy in the narcotics trade to which they were committed. Julio had a special ability to masquerade as an art scholar, a stealth which he particularly enjoyed. He prided himself always on his appearance and his choice of haberdashery. He particularly loved his bow tie collection and his custom-made fake eyeglasses.



They sipped beers and Julio said, “I assume our governor got the message.”

Sergio snuffed, “I am sure that she did. Perhaps she will back off.”

“I do not think that she will back off, *primo*, but she will perhaps be distracted to look for our doings in another place. Where we are not. The rocket was a nice touch. I am glad you thought of it.”

“Ah Julio, it was my pleasure. And we have several cases of them ready should we need them.”

* * * * *

Bob Cohen had his phone out taking pictures around the capitol yard. By this time people knew who he was and although he didn’t dress like some classy media hound, it didn’t matter. He was known.

He also had a small video camera and was trying to get anyone to talk who might have seen the altercation between the state police and the alleged assailants. A couple of people were willing to talk but they provided no real revelatory information. A rocket had been launched at a sculpture. Sculpture now *kaput*. Black SUV sped off. Cops clueless. End of story. Not much for Cohen to do with that. It was dramatic, yes. It involved explosives, yes. It had taken place at the state capitol, yes. Officers were on the scene, yes. But no one was injured and no one was apprehended. The explosion of what seemed to be the same vehicle a few blocks away made the tale more interesting but the police were releasing no speculations yet about that.

Officer Duvall had done as he said. He had sent the alert of the attack to his headquarters, which immediately dispatched several officers and the SWAT team, who arrived in succession in about ten minutes. The smoking framework of the sculpture was about all there was to see. He scanned the area carefully, and went to the main doors of the capitol, which of course, were locked. He peered in, was seen by two capitol guards watching from the inside and motioned him to wait. One opened a door quickly, looked around carefully and let Duvall in.

“I am State Trooper Duvall. Is everything secure in here?” and he showed his ID.

“All personnel are secure, yes. Can you tell us what has happened?” the guard asked.

“We were about to apprehend a suspicious looking motorist. They launched a weapon at one of those sculpture pieces of art outside and it exploded. That’s all I can say at the moment. Other assets are in pursuit and investigating. My job is to liaison with the governor’s office to ensure stability inside here. Is there anything I can do to assist?”

The guard spoke into his shoulder mic and then said to Duvall, “The governor wishes you to stay here. She will be here momentarily.”

“Very good,” Duvall replied and stood in a careful but nonchalant way so as not to look like he was going to move quickly in any way.

In a couple of minutes Governor Grimley, flanked by her two aides, both armed, walked out of the main hall and towards Duvall. “Hello officer,” she said to him, “It has been a rowdy day. What can you tell me?”

“I had been tailing a suspicious Suburban, Madam Governor. I followed it three times around the capitol and decided to call for back-up and pull the vehicle over. The driver was very nicely dressed. He said he was an art collector, and that he had been planning to see if he could purchase something from the museum. It happened in a flash, but the rear driver’s side door window rolled down and I was facing a high caliber weapon. I dropped, as trained to do, and it seemed at that moment that the other rear door window opened and some kind of rocket propelled grenade launched and exploded the sculpture.”

“I see, officer,” Grimley said. “Thank you for your service. That is all I need for now. Again, thank you for being so alert. I am glad you were not injured. Carry on.” She walked away as quickly as she had approached. Carlos and Bill had been very watchful the whole two minutes and about-faced with her. She had seemed, understandably, very nervous.



Three other state troopers were around the facility too, checking carefully for any intruders. They had been on normal duty there when the attack had come. They assured all office workers and anyone else they saw that the event had been outside, and that the grounds were secure now. One employee, a young Hispanic woman named Heather, seemed upset. She approached one of the officers and inquired, “Officer, are we safe?”

“Yes ma’am,” he answered, noting her name and department. She was Heather Marcos, Network Administrator, her badge said. She thanked him and walked off and called someone on her cell phone.

* * * * *

Cohen was now sitting in a sidewalk café a half block away. He was conservatively sipping a coffee. He pulled out his cell phone and touched the speed-dial to Mindy McConnell. Again. This was becoming a regular thing these days.

“Hi Bob. What’s up?” she said into her phone.

“Do you know what just happened?” he asked.

“Um, if I say ‘no’ do I get lectured? I was in a meeting,” she answered.

“No big deal, but about twenty-five minutes ago an explosion in the capitol courtyard blew up a piece of art. Not that it’s any big loss, but apparently it was some kind of attack. No injuries.”

“Where are you?” she asked.

“At the coffee shop, a half block down on Paseo. You know the one.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen. Wait for me, please,” she requested.

“You got it, Mindy,” and he disconnected.

Exactly fifteen minutes later, she walked to his table with a latte in hand and sat down. She said nothing. He looked at her, trying to gauge her state of mind.

“So how are you this fine explosive afternoon?” Cohen asked with a ridiculous smile.

“I’m fine, Mr. Cohen, but the hits just keep coming for this town it seems,” she replied.

“Yes, we are certainly not bored these days. Is CNN on this yet?” he asked with a tad of involuntary sarcasm.

“Well, sorta. Do we know what caused the explosion?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Whaddaya say we go find out?”

She stood back up, holding on to her latte, and they walked back towards the capitol complex. She got her press credentials out and hung them around her neck. His Santa Fe Day badge was clipped to his belt. His belt also held his Glock G19 in a holster.

A small army of state police and detectives were now ambling around the scene. Pictures were being taken, small conversations ongoing, and an ever-growing crowd of citizen onlookers, needing an ever-growing city police presence. Mindy and Bob could only get so close, if for no other reason than there was so much activity by all the other officials. A hostile explosion at a location like this, with the important people inside was not taken as routine.

* * * * *

Julio’s cell chirped and he saw the name Brezo. He answered, “*Si señora*?”

“Cubist chaos,” she said flatly and disconnected.

Julio smiled and put his phone back into his pocket.

* * * *

Mindy looked at the people around the capitol yard and approached a fellow who looked to have been a witness by the shocked look on the face.



“Mindy McConnell, CNN. Sir, can I ask you a question or two?” she asked.

“Uh, sure, I guess so,” replied the fellow.

“Were you around during the explosion, did you see it?”

“Yeah, I was right over there by the gate. It wasn’t an explosion. It was a missile or something,” the man said. “And it hit that hanging piece of art, thing. Whatever you call it, a sculpture or something.

“Why do you think someone would launch a missile at a sculpture?”

“Could be he was aiming at the capitol, ya know? I think the hanging thing got in the way,” the man said.

Mindy stepped back. “Why do you think that sir?” she asked with newfound interest.

“The dude didn’t have a lot of time to set up. The cops were there and I think he stuck the thing out of the SUV’s window and pulled the trigger.”

“You saw this, sir?” Mindy was not making this interview easy.

“Yeah, I saw it. It was like an RPG, like you see the ragheads using.”

“An RPG, sir?” she continued her act as if she knew nothing.

“Yeah, geesh lady don’t you know nothin’? An RPG. A rocket-propelled-grenade.” He tried to form the shape of a standard Russian RPGZ-7. “Like two cones attached at the base.”

“Sir, so you saw the thing sticking out of the vehicle and then saw it shoot off, right?” she was being so difficult, he thought.

“You got it, and man it whooshed. Sculpture didn’t stand a chance.”

“And why do you think it was aimed at the capitol and not the sculpture?” she asked.

“Cuz it would be stupid to shoot a sculpture don’t ya think? Plus . . .”

“Plus what, sir?”

“Plus, I heard that some gang was gunnin’ for the governor after Christmas Eve,” he said, more quietly. “Didn’t you hear that?”

At that, the fellow walked away and Mindy was standing there alone. Cohen walked up. He had seen her interviewing the man and stayed back to not interrupt.

Mindy looked at him and said, “The man said it was an RPG, rocket propelled grenade, and that he saw it sticking out of the window of the SUV. Said it looked like two cones attached at the base.”

“Ruchnoy Protivotankoviy Granatomyot,” Cohen dryly said.

Mindy looked cockeyed at him, “Or that.” Cohen chuckled.

“Common enough shoulder-fired rocket. I’ve seen a million of them. But it’s a serious escalation against the people of New Mexico. The heaviest ordnance we’re used to is machine guns. Now, they’ve taken to carrying RPGs. Things are only going to get worse,” Cohen mused. “Maybe we should let them have the streets and bring in whatever products to sell that they want.”

Mindy didn’t take the bait. “Sure, fine. Let’s do that,” she said. There was nothing much more to learn here, so they went off to find a bite to eat.

* * * * *

At the moment of the attack in the state capitol complex, Jim Pappas was in his office at the Bataan Memorial Building on Galisteo Street. He did not hear the noise from the explosion in the capitol courtyard, but he did hear the subsequent explosion of the SUV in the hotel parking garage which was two blocks north of his building. He looked up from his desk and walked to a window. He could see a plume



of black smoke rising from the garage. He thought to himself, *what was that?* and went over to the administrative desk and asked one of the assistants. She was on her cell phone and replied, “Apparently there was an attack at the capitol. I talked to my friend, Heather, who works in the capitol, and she said there was an explosion in the yard and that was followed by an SUV explosion a few blocks away.”

“Wow. I wonder what’s going on,” Jim said. The administrative assistant shrugged but seemed worried. At that point, a security officer was going through the offices, giving assurance that whatever had happened was done, and that the outside was swarming with state troopers and everyone would be briefed as soon as possible. Please stay inside. Everyone was happy to comply.

Jim thought to himself. *Wait. How does someone in the capitol know that an SUV exploded several blocks away right after it happened? News travels fast, but it doesn’t travel that fast.*

He went back to the administrator and, as casually as he could, said “Anne, who did you say you heard that from?”

Anne said, “Heather. Heather Marcos. She’s a network administrator in the governor’s office,” and went back to her computer.

“Thanks Anne,” Jim said and smiled and went back to his desk.

75

The Cavern Fellowship pastors all heard about the attack at the capitol and the local news was speculating from whom it might have come. By now the existence of a dangerous drug cartel in their area was no secret, especially after the Christmas Eve attack. That had become national news of course, but as all news events do, it had fallen back from the front-line attention in favor of more recent events. It was now late in January and Santa Fe only now made it back to the front pages with another incidence of violence, this time on the grounds of the state capitol.

Mindy McConnell and Bob Cohen had become slightly less than famous for their reporting and for their presence and involvement at the Christmas Eve occurrence. Their conversations with a few of the Cavern Fellowship pastors, which they called the Hit-G pastors, had seemed to increase. They weren't systematically talking to all of them because there was little new to discuss. But Mindy and Bob had struck up a friendship, which almost felt like a collaboration of sorts, with a few of them—the two priests, Pastors Moniz and Menendez, and Pastor Charlie Ethan. Secondarily, they were friendly—when they saw her—with Maegan Grimley, the governor's daughter, who was a member of Pastor Charlie's congregation, and with Lieutenant Philipsburg, whose foot seemed to be healing faster than Sophia Menendez's shoulder.

The churches had developed a private and below-the-radar security patrol and McConnell and Cohen knew not to talk about it much. But they felt a kindred spirit with these pastors, with all that had happened around them. They felt particularly close to these five clergymen and their wives. Mindy had visited Sophia as often as she could. The woman's shoulder wound, from the rifle round that pierced it, was taking a long time to heal. The damage to both tissue and bone was severe. Two surgeries had done a remarkable job even though it would take months of recovery and painful therapy.

Cohen and McConnell were having pizza and beer in his RV when Bob's phone chirped. He looked at it and saw that it was Jim Pappas.

"Am I calling at a good time, Bob?" asked Pappas.

"Yeah sure, I'm sharing a so-so pizza with my favorite beer-queen," snarked Cohen. Mindy frowned and almost flipped him an aviary gesture but held back.

"I want to share something that I've been thinking about, but it might be nothing," Pappas said. "Can you meet me at Alamos Brew tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah, sure, you don't want to tell me now?" Cohen inquired.

"Tomorrow would be better, in person," Pappas came back.

"Fine, how about eight thirty?"



"Good and thanks, see you then," Pappas finished and clicked his cell off.

* * * * *

Alamos Brew typically opened at six thirty on Saturdays and would be filled with happy patrons by seven o'clock. By eight thirty, it could be very busy which didn't seem to bother anybody. It was its own little church. People looked forward to seeing each other and the proprietors sometimes wondered if some kind of expansion of floor space might be warranted. Since this wasn't a larger metropolitan area with countless coffee shops available to the java-craving public, Alamos Brew was a favorite establishment for lots of people.

Jim Pappas arrived early, hoping to snag a table for himself and Bob Cohen. He spotted one, laid his backpack down, and ordered a large, hot house blend, added half-and-half at the *aditivos* bar, and some standard white sugar. He sat down, got out his *Wall Street Journal* and relaxed, waiting for the Santa Fe Day reporter to arrive. At eight thirty exactly, Cohen walked in, saw Pappas, got himself a latte and joined him.

"Good morning, Bob. Thanks for meeting with me," said Pappas.

"Same at ya, and a pleasure. Hope you are well, and how is Karen these days?" he asked with a smile on his face.

Pappas smiled back, "She is well. Bob, I heard something that I thought was strange, in reference to the capitol incident. You were there soon after it happened, right?"

"Oh? Yeah, we showed up when the place was crawling with cops," Cohen said. "There wasn't a lot to report, ya know? Explosion of some ugly art sculpture—no loss to anyone," he grinned. "Sorry, I know you're sensitive to loss of culture. And then not long after, another explosion, a blown-up SUV in a nearby parking garage that seems almost certainly related, especially since it appears to be the same SUV that launched the RPG. No bodies. No casualties. Another day in Santa Fe."

Pappas answered, “And the story ends there, I guess. But here’s the thing. When the second thing happened, the garage is near my office in the Bataan Building, and we all heard it. A woman in my office made a call to someone she knows in the capitol—a network administrator who works for the governor—to find out what was going on. The woman told her there had been apparently some kind of attack outside, followed by a second explosion of an SUV.”

Cohen got interested. “How did she know it was an SUV from inside the capitol? How would she know that fast?”

“Exactly,” Pappas shot back. “Something’s wrong here, Bob. I thought I should tell somebody.”

Cohen rubbed his forehead and sipped his latte. “She got a tip, sounds like. Who is this woman?”

“I wrote it down when my co-worker told me. Heather Marcos,” Pappas said, quieter.

Cohen punched a note into his phone and said, “Jim, sharp thinking. I’m glad you called me. Let me follow this up, carefully, I assure you. Could be a lead.”

Pappas sat back in his chair, looked around the coffee shop, and said, “These are weird times, man.”

Cohen snuffed, “Yup, copy that.”

* * * * *

Heather Marcos had come down with a cold. Convenient. She was going to take a sick day from her job. She called in and told the administrative assistant that she was ill today. “Hope you feel better, Heather,” said the admin. “Thank you,” and Heather sneezed.

Then she cleaned up and got into her car and drove to a nice address in the Las Campanas area, north of the city. There, she would meet with Julio Hernández and Sergio Sánchez. She did not know the topic of discussion but it did not matter. She



was, sort of, Sergio’s girlfriend. As instructed, she took a circuitous route to the house. It was a bleached stucco home, unobtrusive, one level, on a slight rise in a nicely manicured neighborhood. She drove down the alley to the rear of the home where a garage door opened. The door closed behind her.

Heather got out of the car and was met by Sergio who gave her a peck on the cheek. She sneezed. He stepped back. “You are not playing at this, are you, my dear?” he said in English.

“Maybe I am allergic to *banditos*,” she said, and laughed. Heather Marcos, born Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia, was a ruthless cutthroat *bandida* herself. She was a perfect partner for Julio and Sergio in their organization. She appeared to be in her twenties but was actually thirty-seven. She was of average attractiveness, not attention-getting, feared no one, and she possessed the ability to charm, to act simple, to work her way through complex computer issues, to appear the benign corporate employee, to feign a normal life. She could be affectionately warm or cut someone’s throat with a smile. She was the perfect plant inside the office of the Governor of New Mexico, who loved her, by the way. If she had a fault, it was a bravado spirit that caused a slight indiscretion here and there. Among her co-workers she appeared to be the spice person every office likes to have in their midst.

She flung herself into the couch and Julio said, “Heather, we just barely got out of that trial. And unfortunately, Sergio blew up a nice sculpture.”

“I won’t miss it, and it was a lovely distraction so that you people could make an escape. Serg knows how to fire an RPG,” and she smiled at him.

“So how did *Madam Gobernadora* react to our little altercation,” asked Sergio?

“They rushed her someplace, I don’t know where, but when you were gone, she came back out and was mad as can be,” Heather reported. To everyone else she was Heather, only Julio knew her real name. “I got a call from a friend in an office near the parking garage. All I said was, ‘we heard an explosion.’”

“Why did someone call *you*?” Julio asked nervously.

“Because, my dear, I do have friends around the capitol. Do you not think it would look strange if I was solo all the time?” Heather said with great confidence.

“Yes, I see. It is good to act as any employee in the capitol might. I am sure there were many calls made between friends when our SUV went ‘boom,’” Julio reflected. At that moment Heather remembered that she had told her friend it was an SUV but she did not think it was a big deal.

“When are we expecting a new package of product, if I may ask?” she queried Julio.

“Soon, my dear. It will come very cleverly packaged with a delivery of several wonderful pieces of art which I have ordered. Ingenious, I should think.” Julio was always proud of himself for new ways to bring in shipments of narcotics, though these would look like normal medications in their packaging. “Then we will need to employ our distribution channels again. We are, as you know, depleted in our personnel,” and he frowned.

Sergio was silent. She spoke, “Christmas Eve was a disaster. Is it really that important to get Menendez?” Julio did not answer her but spoke to Sergio, “Sergio, my friend, I have been thinking about these holes in the ground. Might one or two of them be a good place to arrange the pickup?”

“Do you mean in a hole in the ground, amigo?” Sergio seemed puzzled. “It would be below the surface of the ground and not visible. But getting down into one of these holes and out again might be difficult, yes?”

Julio laughed hard. “No, no, my friend, you are such an exact representationist!”

“*Qué*?” quipped Sergio.

“No, my cousin,” Julio explained, “Not exactly what I said, I mean, at the locations or one of them. They are a curiosity but the wonder of their appearing seems to have faded now. They are unwatched, I think now, and one might provide an unexpected point of rendezvous for us, yes? I am just, how do they say, ‘thinking out loud?’”

Heather added, “The two synagogue sites especially seem to attract no interest.”



We shall drive by tomorrow night, then. Let us see,” Julio concluded. “Heather, my dear, would you be interested in preparing us some supper? I am given to understand that the mere preparation of a meal can be quite therapeutic for a head cold.”

Heather rolled her eyes but proceeded to the kitchen.

* * * * *

Bob Cohen text messaged State Trooper Avon Duvall. Not because he especially liked Trooper Duvall but because he knew him and thought he would be the best person to share his piece of information with. They arranged a meet. Where? Outside Alamos Brew.

Trooper Duvall’s RAM pulled up alongside Cohen’s Jeep. Windows were rolled down and Cohen said, “Look officer, I heard something I thought you might be interested in . . .”

Duvall wondered at the cloak-and-dagger, between-the-vehicles format, but went with it. “Shoot, Mr. Cohen.”

“I talked with a state employee who overheard a phone conversation between one of his co-workers and someone inside the capitol, right after the capitol explosion. The person in the capitol works for the governor.”

“Go on, Bob,” Duvall said.

“The capitol worker mentioned that right after it happened, an SUV had blown up. I mean, minutes after.” Duvall listened.

“How did the capitol worker know that information?” Duvall asked.

“Exactly,” Cohen said, “That’s why the employee called me. He wondered the same thing. Quick thinking, I thought. So, I asked him for a name. He gave me Heather Marcos. I thought maybe you could do something with that.”

“Thanks, Bob. I will look into it. One other thing. How are you and Ms. McConnell doing after Christmas Eve?” He sounded truly concerned.

“We’re okay. It shook Mindy up pretty good but then she seems to have commando characteristics buried down inside that reporter demeanor.”

“Hmm, could be helpful. One other thing. Off the record, are you two a thing?” asked the trooper.

“Shaddup. I mean, shaddup, officer,” and they both laughed. Cohen drove off.

* * * * *

It was a bright, sunny, mid-winter day in Santa Fe. Governor Grimley was at work in her office and all staffers were doing their jobs. No one was talking much about the recent attack. Not much to say, except, “Why would someone attack the capitol?” and there was really no answer.

Heather Marcos did her job, cheerful and charming as usual, with no one having any suspicions of her real identity. But a quiet investigation had begun by the state police. They had received a tip and her name. Trooper Duvall walked into the capitol on a faux mission to get some expert advice on networking, for which a memo had been sent as a request for assistance to the Police, who were employing some new computer protocols. Duvall went through the front checkpoint and was directed to the Office of Network Administration on the second floor. He was not known by name in the *Demônios* organization, but to enhance his unrecognizability he shaved his head and grew a small mustache. He went through the door and to the welcome counter. A woman approached him whose ID lanyard read: Heather. “May I help you?” she asked.

“Yes, I am Officer Duvall from the state police and I was sent here to get some instruction on the new TeamUp protocols for our department.” He showed his ID and handed her a sheet of paper, a letter authorizing his reception of training, signed by his chief.

“Yes, officer, you’re in the right place. We got an e-mail too, telling us to expect you. Have a seat over there and I’ll be with you shortly.” Duvall thanked her and sat



down, trying to appear slightly put out, having to go through some kind of office rigamarole when he, the daring trooper, would rather be out doing real police work. Marcos noticed nothing awry. She took it all as routine.

The network administration office employed a number of skilled information-technology types: hardware specialists, wiring trouble-shooters and installers, programming geeks, and so forth. Heather Marcos was not head of the department, but a respected generalist who was liked by all and respected by most. She knew her TeamUp facts and the software system’s strengths and weaknesses. Of the latter, she did not say much.

She came over to Duvall and asked him, “So do you have a computer terminal available to you most of the time,” she asked? “This will take you some time to learn, and it is best if you can access the system from anywhere.”

“Yes ma’am, I do,” Duvall answered, being careful to act intimidated by, one, being in the capitol, two, by being instructed by a woman, and three, by being obligated to learn something that was not cop-ish but more geek-ish. Heather gave him the vibe that she also was routinely bored by the whole process—which was partly a ruse. Being around law enforcement automatically triggered her alert system.

“Come around here, officer, to this terminal and I can show you how to log into the tutorial,” Heather motioned to Duvall. He did so, and they each sat down at a desk with a large monitor. She logged herself in, and then invited Duvall to enter a username and password. She dutifully stood up and walked across the room. Duvall did so and feigned a “failure to log in” response on the machine. He asked, “Uh ma’am, it won’t sign me in.”

Marcos came back and reset the log-in sequence and offered it to him again. She laughed, “I’m sorry Mr. Duvall, I forgot to tell you the password has to have a capital, a numeral, and a special character.”

“Okay,” he said and she turned away once again as he created a usable password. “All of this is so frustrating ma’am. I’m more used to flooring my cruiser and chasing bad guys,” and he laughed. “I bet,” was all she replied.

“Now we’re in and here is the site you want,” taking him to the tutorial file, which he looked at and started clicking his way through a menu.

“I gotta get better at using this computer stuff,” he said, not looking up. “There’s so much violence and bizarre stuff happening, and computers turning to computers is new to me,” he said matter-of-factly. “I’d rather polish my truck to be honest with you,” and chuckled.

Heather was annoyed at another macho idiot, she thought. Then she thought maybe she could pump this gringo for some insight. Might be useful.
“What’s been happening, officer? I’m stuck in here most of the time with my brain wired into some accounting problem or another software glitch. There is no end to those,” and she laughed and flipped her long brown hair away.

“Oh, you know, ma’am, the attack outside of the capitol and all that—I’m sure you know about that. I was working that day but on the other side of town. Must have been scary though,” Duvall offered. “Anyway, they told us not to talk about that, so I should shut up.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I heard the explosion and, between you and me, the governor freaked!” She laughed quietly and shook her head. “But hey, it was quite an explosion. Someone said it was a rocket or something.”

“The newspaper said, and like I say, I was down on patrol in Galisteo when whatever it was happened,” Duvall said, focusing on the computer monitor like he was half-paying attention to what he was saying.

*This guy is a fire hose,* thought Heather. She calmly said, “Do you think there are any leads about who did it?”

The back of officer Duvall’s neck lit up. He scratched it but kept his composure. “Ma’am, I wish I could say ‘yes, we’re on it,’ but I’m afraid we’ve got nothing. Whoever did whatever they did—and if I may say, if I were the governor, I would be upset—made a clean escape. But we shouldn’t discuss this in here. We might be recorded,” and laughed sarcastically.



“Officer, if there was any recording being done or surveillance, I would know about it. In fact, I would probably be the one doing it!” and she laughed but then immediately pulled herself in check.

Duvall deftly acted like she had said nothing. He said, “Bingo, I think I’ve got this,” referring to what he was supposed to be doing on the computer. “TeamUp. That’s a funny name. You would think that the government of the State of New Mexico could come up with something more sophisticated. Sounds more like a beverage name!” She took the bait.

“Yeah, like ‘Seven-Up,’” and they both laughed. Duvall sat back in his desk chair, which was snug for him. He acted like he couldn’t get comfortable. He then said, “Was this chair made for small administrators?” Marcos was petite. She snorted and said, “Officer, I think you’ve got enough to get you into the tutorial, is there anything else I can help you with today?” Duvall knew they were done for today so he stood up and thanked her for her help.

“One more thing, how do I remember my password that I just set? They told us back at headquarters never to write down a password.”

She looked askance at him, wondering if he was clever or stupid. She went with stupid. She went to another desk and retrieved a business card, handed it to him and invited him to write it down on her card, which he did. Then she said, “Keep my card and you can contact me with any questions. Then when you get to wherever you call home base, write the password down there or log on and set the entry protocol to remember your password. This gets you into the training site anyway. No great state secrets there,” and she stuck out her hand to shake his. The encounter was over.

“Thank you, ma’am. I enjoyed the session. I will contact you if I have anything else,” and thought to himself, *and how.*

She smiled nicely and walked him down to the staircase at the entrance of the capitol. “You can find your way from here, I am sure,” she said more coolly. “Yes ma’am and thank you.” He departed crisply, giving her the impression he was glad to be out of there.

Back in his cruiser, he carefully placed the business card in a zip lock bag and headed back to the state police headquarters.

* * * * *

Julio and Sergio drove by the site of the former Temple Beit Lehem, slowing only for a moment on their first pass. It was dusk and hard to see much, but then they sped up in case there was any surveillance, as unlikely as that seemed. They were in a silver Toyota SUV, very non-descript. From that location they drove to another of their safe houses, electronically opened the garage door, and drove in. Inside was a dark blue Ford Ranger pick-up. It had a dented fender on the rear and was also very non-descript, and not very clean. They hopped in and headed back to the Temple Beit Lehem address. This time they stopped and got out and walked over to the hole. All was quiet. They looked in and Sergio sneezed. “Eeesh, I hate that smell,” he said. “Too sweet.” Julio smelled nothing and shrugged.

“This place will do fine,” he said. It is out of the way, and there is no way it could be under watch, and what’s to watch here anyway?”

“Yes, my *primo*,” Sergio said and sneezed again. “We should set the time of our connection for about eleven o’clock, I think.”

*Unseen to either Demônios member, was Kuriosagapa, standing on one side of the hole. His gaze was aimed at them, but his purpose in being there was not revealed. There he was, however, expressionless, watching.*

“Good,” replied Julio, “That is the time of the shift change for the police. Our delivery friends can meet here, and we shall enjoy a wonderful delivery of fine art.” They looked at each other, and quietly laughed. They did not know that the walls of this hole had again become extremely toxic with the new fluoroantimonic super acid. Although Sergio, unknowingly, had smelled it.

* * * * *

To imagine that an angel would involve itself with a direct interaction with this world is highly speculative and fanciful, if not presumptuous. The dynamics, timing, restraints, and decision-making prerogatives about the angelic world are vaguely understood, at least according to biblical material. The Bible tells of occasions when



angels appeared, spoke understandably to humans, and did things in this world. In traditional theology the field is called angelology, and that corpus of information—limited though it be—was believed by all the Cavern Fellowship pastors and presumably, by all their church members.

However, only Karen Asnat and Jim Pappas had visibly encountered an angel, and that information they had mostly kept to themselves. Karen had shared it with State Trooper Avon Duvall, who had said that her secret was safe with him. But that was it. It was too unusual and powerful to share with anyone else. It had, nevertheless, been so real and had become a bonding experience between Pappas and Asnat. Neither dreaded thinking about it, but neither brought it up. The experience had driven them both, together, to undertake a study of angelic references in the Bible, a task that wasn’t hard to accomplish via internet resources. At the same time, neither were much interested in popular testimonies, books, TV shows or media talks of encounters with angels. They had their own encounter to ponder.

Jim and Karen were sharing coffee at Alamos Brew and looking at Gideon pocket-sized New Testaments. Their copies were small and unobtrusive. Karen found it curious that they had the Book of Psalms in them, but she didn’t mind. That only seemed to cement in her mind the kinship of the two testaments.

They were reading together the First Epistle of Peter, the apostle. They each remembered that Peter had encountered two angels, or “two men in white apparel,” at Jesus’s ascension, according to the Book of Acts.

They had also read in Luke’s first book that several women had seen what surely had to be two angels at Jesus’s tomb, who had actually spoken to the women, whose names were even recorded. Karen drew joy from learning that those angels had appeared to women. Karen, with the mind of an editor, noticed that according to the text, the two men asked questions. Apparently, they were not omniscient. Then Karen remembered from her time as a child studying the Torah that two angels had visited and protected Lot, and that Torah even said that they ate.

Today Pappas and Asnat encountered this passage:

> Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ, which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.

Karen sat back in her chair and read quietly out loud. "'Things the angels desire to look into.' Why would angels desire to look into this stuff?" she asked. "Don't they already know everything?"

Jim thought about it. "What do I know but it's an interesting phrase. Why would angels need to look into anything about humans?" Then he laughed. Sort of. "Maybe we could ask our angel."

"Our angel?" she asked, "We maybe shouldn't call him that."

"You're right. Let me rephrase it. Maybe we could ask the angel who appeared to us and scared the bejeebers out of us. If he appears again."

"I would not be able to do that. I don't think I could ask him anything," she said, as much to herself as to Jim.

"But we didn't make this up," Jim said, holding his New Testament. "Peter wrote it. He said that this whole salvation plan that the Old Testament prophets were predicting, was something that angels want to 'look into.' If I get the chance, I think I might ask him, 'What can you tell us?' I mean, why would Peter say that, if people are not supposed to know anything about angels?" But he was getting more doubtful as they talked.

Karen then said, "Jim, focus on what we read: the things the angels desire to look into are what the Holy Ghost, sent down from heaven, had revealed to people—the first Christians, I guess."



Jim and Karen were not accustomed to using the term *the gospel* yet. But Jim noticed it, "'Them that had preached the gospel had done it with the Holy Ghost, sent from heaven.' That's so sci-fi cool!"

Karen rolled her eyes. "Maybe there's a *Star Trek* episode that talks about this!"

Jim laughed, "That would be a logical possibility," he said in a bad imitation of Mr. Spock.

She took his hand and smiled. "I like reading the Bible with you, Jim."

He turned red. "I like it too," was all he could say, his heart warmed.

* * * * *

Bob Cohen was in his RV updating his daily news load to his Santa Fe Day website. It was early Saturday morning and he was developing a nagging awareness that he had now probably become known by *Demônios Elevados* as an enemy. He had received no communications from anyone with the gang and he surely was not looking for another altercation. But the hairs on the back of his neck were telling him to watch his six. He had recently installed two security cameras outside his residence and camouflaged them. One looked at his door, and the other looked at the rear of the RV. Their feed came to his computer, which had a good battery back-up in case his RV lost power. He also got the feed on his cell phone so he could check his cameras no matter where he was. In addition, his system would quietly signal an alert when any motion was detected. Finally, there were two dim light fixtures which would blink twice if there was a hit.

He offered to set up the same security perimeter for Mindy McConnell at her place, which she was only too happy to accept. It was up and running now too, with the same specifications. She had coolly thanked him with a gift card to his favorite burrito bar. "Such a hopeless romantic," he snorted to himself. News people couldn't be too careful these days.

* * * * *

A dirty white work van pulled up the street on which Temple Beit Lehem had been located. The hole now gaped open undisturbed. It was eleven o'clock and very dark

with no moon. The van stopped at the location, then drove down the street for a mile or so before turning around and coming back, slowing, then stopping about fifty feet from the hole. There was no sign of course, and nothing to mark the synagogue's previous existence. The two fellows in the van had been told to drive to a hole. So here they were. They waited.

Sergio looked through his NVGs from a quarter of a mile away and spotted the van. He said to Julio, "They're here." Julio nodded and their black van crept towards the white one, meeting driver door to driver door.

"Back around to my rear door," Julio said. The driver of the white van nodded and began to pull around. His rear wheel edged too close to the hole and the dirt rim began to break off and collapse. The driver floored the accelerator but that only dug out the hole's edge more and the van tipped to the side and rolled twice, coming to rest on its roof at the bottom, about fifteen feet down. It lay still with smoke rising from the engine.

"*Tonterías!*" Julio yelled. He and Sergio scrambled out of the van and peered over the edge. No movement. The driver and his companion must be stunned. Sergio looked around and said, "We have to get them out of there. I've got a chain in the back of the van."

"How are we going to get it down to them?" Julio asked. He spoke, loudly, down into the hole.

"*Muchacho!*"

"*Santa Maria!*" came out of the darkness. "We are here. Wait."

Julio was in no mood to wait. The vapor was rising and it was irritating to his nostrils. He sneezed twice.

"Sergio, go get the chain. We can throw it down and they can attach it," Julio said and Sergio went to the back of their van.

The occupants of the wrecked van were working to climb out of the passenger side window. As they each got out, they crawled onto the smooth dirt. When their



hands touched the dirt, they each screamed in pain and their clothing began to smoke.

Julio heard the sounds of terror coming out of the darkness and threw the end of the chain down into the void. The frantic screams continued. Julio called down, "What is the matter? What do you need?"

No response. Silence, except for the sound of metal snapping and collapsing, as if being compressed. From ground level, Julio and Sergio could see nothing. Though their cache of narcotics and art was in the van in the hole, Julio slapped Sergio on the shoulder and said, "Let's get out of here." They got into their van and drove off, each unnerved at what they had just experienced.

Sergio drove for a couple of miles and pulled on to a side street in a commercial neighborhood and stopped. He looked at Julio. "What happened?" he asked.

"I do not know, but I am sure going to find out," Julio said quietly. "May God have mercy on our two poor *camaradas*. I think it was a trap and I think I might know the bastard who set it."

* * * * *

The next morning, Avon Duvall was on patrol in his RAM cruiser, relaxed, and for no reason found himself moving from Hit-G site to Hit-G site. He thought to himself that it is reasonable and responsible to keep an eye on the places of the biggest mystery in New Mexico history. None of the holes looked any different until he cruised by the Temple Beit Lehem site.

A wispy vapor seemed to be coming out of that hole. He got out of his vehicle, donned a pair of googles, and looked over the side from about two feet away from the edge. At the bottom was a collection of what looked like scrap metal. As he looked around the hole he could see, across it, where the edge had caved in. He also noticed that the vapor, though not thick, had a strange kind of purple hue to it.

He backed away from the side of the hole and called Jim Pappas and asked if he could come to the site. Then he called dispatch and reported his findings. Two

detectives would be on their way and, at the report of a vapor rising, a HAZMAT team would be requested. He was told to stand away from the hole and wait in his cruiser, which he did. He also called Bob Cohen.

Twenty minutes later, four cruisers, a HAZMAT van, and Bob Cohen's Jeep were parked on the property of the Temple Beit Lehem, well away from the hole itself. The state police watch commander was in charge, and he was working to coordinate the HAZMAT investigators and the news media. There wasn't much to do, actually. The various personnel were now concluding that someone had driven or fallen into the hole. A fragrant vapor continued rising from the hole, but it was making people sneeze. The HAZMAT commander said to the state police watch commander, "That can't be good. I want a quarter mile perimeter set and until we know what we're dealing with, traffic diverted away." The watch commander complied and informed his officers to arrange the detour and set up hazardous area markers and boundaries.

Cohen, who had Mindy McConnell with him, asked Avon Duvall, "What happened, officer?"

Duvall said, "Bob, we don't know yet. It might be someone drove up and dumped a bunch of industrial trash over the side. It's more likely that some kind of vehicle drove up to the side of the hole, the side caved in, and they rolled over into it, about fifteen feet down. But there's no sign of a driver. They're suiting up two HAZMAT investigators and lowering them down. Maybe they can find some answers." At that moment, another car arrived. It was Jim Pappas. He saw Cohen and Duvall and walked slowly over to them.

"Good morning, Mr. Pappas. What brings you here?" asked the state trooper. "I can't say as I am surprised," he laughed, "Some of us keep running into each other."

"I called to let him know, Officer," Cohen buffered, "I knew he had been down into one of these holes before."

"The governor, too, Officer," answered Pappas. "What happened?"

Duvall and Cohen told Pappas what they knew, and that because of the strange vapor, HAZMAT had cordoned off the area.



"And I've smelled that before," offered Pappas. "It was the first thing I noticed when I went down in the first site. It's kind of a nice smell."

Cohen patted the state trooper on the back, "Apparently a vehicle went down into that hole."

"We don't know that with any certainty yet," continued Duvall. "When the HAZMAT guys come back up, we'll see what they make of whatever is still down there."

Pappas went over closer to the edge, though other troopers were watching him carefully. He inched his way closer and looked in.

"You know, we took some soil samples back at the other hole and had them analyzed. Not much has been said about it, and I was told not to talk about it," Pappas said. "It was a superacid, something extremely corrosive, and it had three other components that could not be chemically identified. We did every analysis that could be done and we still don't know what makes the soil so destructive. Other than the governor, no one has reported any injuries." Duvall frowned at him at that point, and shook his head subtly, but Cohen saw it.

The HAZMAT people were coming out of the hole, raised by an Altec lift-truck that had been brought to the site. They had two bags of something they had collected from down in the hole. Duvall, Cohen, and Pappas approached the men, standing behind the watch officer.

"Mr. Pappas, weren't you with the Governor in that other hole?" the officer said.

"Yes, the Santa Fe Christian Assembly site, sir, and we took soil samples that day. The soil was highly corrosive," Pappas said.

"Let's see what the HAZMAT people have found, shall we? Mr. Cohen, due to the nature of this ongoing investigation, I must ask you to not post anything relating to this incident."

"To serve and protect, sir," was all Cohen said but smiled, and the state police commander knew he had the respect of this former Navy SEAL.

The two HAZMAT officers had large yellow plastic bags, which they opened and dumped on to the ground. The watch commander, Duvall, Cohen, and Pappas all gathered around the items. They appeared to be partially dissolved pieces of a vehicle, pieces of seat frames, burned wheels, a few plastic cartons, and some other unidentifiable items. There was nothing that looked like human remains, but there was a partial driver's license in a protective window as from a wallet. There was also a piece of a plastic picture frame.

Cohen said quietly to Pappas, "These are like puzzle pieces from the game of Clue."

The female HAZMAT officer who seemed to be senior in command said, "We brought up all we could. What's left is more of the same. Looks like pieces of a vehicle, small truck, I would guess. Only plastic or composite material pieces seem to have survived the corrosive agent." All the watchers were fascinated.

"What looks to be left are part of two steel wheels, badly burned. No bumpers, nothing with chrome, nothing of an engine. Glass is gone too. But there is a driver's license, so it seems clear this was a vehicle with a driver. Past tense. The remains of what look like pharmaceutical cartons are of interest, as well as a piece of a plastic picture frame. Also, the vapor seems to have stopped, but we videoed it while it was still visible."

The officer's companion handed her a clear plastic bag with the driver's license in it. "Would you like to take a picture of this, commander? We'll need to take it with us along with everything else, to be cleaned and detoxified, then your people can come retrieve it, commander. I know you'll want the state police lab to look at it."

The watch commander and Duvall both did just that. With their phones they took several pictures of the bag, both sides. Cohen did not join them, but Pappas stuck his phone over the bag quickly and clicked one picture. Lettering was clear and the soil did not seem to have obscured much. It was a Texas driver's license issued to Carlos Juarez of Brownsville.



"And no witnesses, of course," mumbled the commander. "I've got to get back to headquarters. Duvall, wrap this up please."

"Yes sir," Duvall snapped.

From a mile away, from over the edge of a hillock, Sergio watched the crowd through a high-powered scope, mounted on a small tripod. He could not, of course, know what the officials were saying but he could see that they had retrieved a couple of bags of something from out of the hole. He was not at all interested in the greater mystery of the holes or even the fate of the two occupants of the van. He was only interested in the van's cargo. He did, however, recognize one man in the crowd—Mr. Robert Cohen, of Santa Fe Day.

76

Governor Lucille Grimley was at her desk in the state capital, trying to focus on various items of pending legislation, but her mind kept wandering back to the latest occurrence in the Hit-G phenomena—the disappearance or disintegration of a vehicle in the hole at the Temple Beit Lehem site. She had scheduled an informal lunch in her office for that day with her daughter, Maegan, and Heather Marcos. On impulse she phoned Jim Pappas, from the Historic Preservation Division, and invited him to join their luncheon. She knew that Pappas had been at the Hit-G site during the initial investigation and had accompanied her down into the first hole. He humbly accepted. She thought, *maybe a collaboration of fresh young minds can give me some new perspective.*

* * * * *

In the governor's conference room, a nice luncheon was laid out—sandwiches, fruit salad, tortilla chips and salsa, a large pitcher of ice water, and a carafe of the governor's favorite coffee, tea, sweeteners, and creamers, and finally a plate of Andes Crème De Menthe thin mints.

Unknown to the governor, there was pasted to the underside of the dining table, a voice activated audio recording chip, about the size of a nickel, which could record any conversation to a logged-in cell phone. Ms. Marcos clandestinely taped the device when she was first to arrive in the room. She smiled and made small talk

when Governor Grimley entered and seated herself. No one noticed her nonchalantly tapping on her phone. She had begun recording and had fifty-two gigabytes to work with.

As the governor's daughter arrived, relaxed pleasantries were exchanged, and then Jim Pappas arrived and found a seat. He said, "Madam Governor, thank you for this kind invitation. How is your hand?" He nodded hello at Heather and immediately grew guarded.

Governor Grimley flexed her hand for all to see and pronounced it fully fit. "Except for a little scarring, it is perfectly fine. I suppose some scarring from serving the fine people of New Mexico is to be expected and a small badge of honor," she laughed.

"Hopefully, that will be the end of any scarring, mother," Maegan remarked and Heather and Jim both nodded in agreement.

The four filled their plates with the luncheon selections that had been put out and began to eat. An attendant came in and poured water for each and then stood off to the side. The governor said, "Thank you, Robert," and they enjoyed several bites of lunch before the governor asked, "Mr. Pappas, I understand a vehicle rolled into one of the Hit-G holes and apparently disappeared. They tell me you were called too?"

Pappas thought this luncheon might be about that. He acted dispassionate. "Yes Governor, I was there and we were trying to figure out what went down into that hole and why? One idea was that it was someone randomly dumping trash but there were vehicle parts that survived. Random things that were impervious to acid degradation it seems."

"If I may ask, Mr. Pappas," asked Heather with the slightest lilt in her voice, as if not really interested but curious, "Why would anyone want to dump trash in one of the holes? Everyone around knows they've been off limits, and there are plenty of recycling sites around."

"Yes, Ms. Marcos, that seems true. We don't think it was random dumping. There are other clues. The pieces left behind indicate that the vehicle—if it was a vehicle—contained art pieces or something. We found a piece or two of a picture frame." He did not mention the driver's license nor the partial pharmaceutical cartons. Then he threw a small curve to see if he might trigger a reaction. He looked at the governor and said, "One of the HAZMAT officers, I think her name was Maria, said she smelled a vapor, and it was pleasant." Then he cast the quickest glance at Heather, who was looking at the governor and he noticed a slight, unconscious raise of an eyebrow. His mentioning her real name got the desired effect. Then he quickly continued. "Do you remember the aroma or fragrance we smelled, Madam Governor?"

"I do, Mr. Pappas," Grimley answered. "It did not smell toxic or dangerous. It was kind of nice, like an essential oil or something."

Maegan Grimley had said nothing and seemed to be enjoying her lunch. Pappas continued, "The pieces also seemed to indicate it was a foreign vehicle. They weren't standard or ordinary car parts." He wanted to throw Marcos off any feeling of suspicion so he wove a theory for that purpose. "I am wondering, and I know I've no official part in all this, if it could have been a small helicopter or unmanned

drone. I can't imagine why anyone would want to do secret research inside one of the holes, but I guess it's a possibility."

Heather relaxed. She now thought, *this guy's loco.*

"Interesting, Mr. Pappas. An interesting idea. Perhaps we should look more in that direction."

This got Maegan's attention. Now she spoke. "Mother, why would anyone want to investigate the holes without officially contacting state authorities? Our state is known for a cooperative attitude towards any archaeological studies, aren't we?"

This was the sort of diversion that Heather was hoping to create herself. She added, "You know, a while back there was some crazy archaeology commando activists who were trying to hack into a New Mexico database. If I remember correctly, they were found out and scared off. Who were they . . .?"

Pappas remained focused on the last of his sandwich, and reached for some of the fruit salad, which Maegan passed to him.

Heather remembered as if she had to think deep to retrieve it, "They were called the 'Old Things Army' or something like that." Now Maegan's eyebrow went up.

"That's not a very creative name," Maegan laughed and accidentally projected a piece of a tortilla chip out of her mouth and onto the table. The governor laughed and said, "Darling, please show some better table manners," and both Pappas and Marcos also laughed. Any pre-luncheon nervousness was now completely dispelled and they were all relaxed. But secretly both Marcos and Pappas were on the alert. Marcos was recording the whole thing with the goal of learning anything useful for the *Demônios*. The completely unexpected loss of the van and its contents had unnerved Julio and of course, his higher-ups. Pappas was watching carefully for any clues from Marcos about, well, anything.

"So, Mr. Pappas," Heather started.

"Jim, please, Ms. Marcos," Pappas interrupted, hoping to relax her.



"Yes, Jim," she responded, "Is your office having any problems with the TeamUp computer system? I had a state trooper come to me for some training. He said it was proving something of a challenge for them in state police."

* * * * *

After work Heather drove home to her apartment, pulled into the garage, changed clothes, and awaited her ride out back in the alley. Thirty minutes later a blue Toyota Camry drove up and Heather got in. Sergio said, warmly, "*Buenas noches, Brezo*," then switched to English, "A nice little day, we trust?" Heather smiled back and kissed him quickly. She handed Sergio the recording device and her phone.

"Anything useful, my dear?" he asked.

"I don't know—you will hear it all—it was the governor, her daughter, and Pappas, the fellow from the Bataan building. He was with the governor in the first church hole. They seemed intrigued at an event at another hole, but clearly no one has any idea what happened. I'm not sure that I do either."

Sergio was silent and drove on, back to the *Demônios* safe house. When they arrived, Heather collapsed into the oversized couch and dozed off immediately. Julio and Sergio withdrew to a bedroom which contained a small electronics lab. They listened to the day's recorded conversation without comment. When Heather awakened, the three sat around the kitchen table and consumed chili and cornbread that Julio had made.

He commented, "The state capitol will be receiving some new art soon, I read," pointing at the day's newspaper. "It is too bad that the sculpture in the yard met its demise," and he laughed.

"*Auge!*" was all Sergio said, and he laughed too.

"When the subject of the new hole came up today, I tried—carefully I might add—to suggest that an archaeological crimes gang was to blame, seeking some kind of artifacts. I don't think they bought it, but that was the best I could do," Heather offered.

“This Pappas worries me,” Julio said. “He is smart, and he cavorts with that Jew-girl. I do not know her name,” Julio reflected.

Julio hated Jews, although even he did not really know why. Somewhere in his background there was a root of hatred, even for supposedly Christianized Jews. He did not know much about Messianic Judaism and it seemed the height of betrayal to both religions. Or a despicable opportunism, grabbing for any theoretical advantage. But hate any Jew, he did. That he himself had sunken to new lows of opportunism, profit-grabbing, and self-focus did not occur to him.

“The governor seems to trust this Pappas fellow,” he continued. “I wonder why?” He stopped, looked at Sergio. “But I do not trust him. And anyone within this *perra gobernadora’s* association merits my distaste.”

“Speaking of distaste, Julio, what is in this cornbread,” asked Heather, munching on her second small loaf.

“Ha! My dear, you don’t seem to mind it too much. It is a new recipe I thought to try. It is called *broa de Milho* and it is from Brazil. One of our Brazilian colleagues suggested I try it. It uses cornmeal and fresh corn, and coconut oil and rye, of all things.”

“May I wrap some up to take home with me?” Heather asked.

“Of course. The plastic wrap is in the drawer next to the refrigerator,” Julio offered and Heather set about to prepare some for her breakfast.

“Sergio, we must find out if this Pappas or his Jewess friend are any threat to us. If they are close to the authorities then we must consider this,” Julio spoke in a business-like voice to his cousin.

“As you wish, of course,” replied Sergio, “but I would be more watchful of this reporter *hombre,* Cohen. He is also Jewish, *si*? With a name like Cohen.”

“Is there no desert on the planet that is free of that dirty religion?” Julio bellowed. “We are in New Mexico for God’s sake!” and he crossed himself.



Sergio chuckled. He found it entertaining when he could trigger any outburst from his cousin-boss who was normally refined and scholarly. Today, even within the sanctity of the safe house he was wearing a red bow tie.

“Two of the holes were synagogues, you will remember, cousin,” Sergio continued dispassionately. “I do not care about such things, but no detail can be ignored. And Cohen was with the team that I observed studying the Jewish hole into which our business partners disappeared.”

“I must think about all of this. I am going to lie down,” and Julio wandered off to his bedroom. Sergio and his girlfriend settled into an evening of drinking, affection, and watching a *Predator* video. The aliens in those movies were his heroes though he told no one this.

* * * * *

Fathers Frank Portacomaro and Marty Clark were drinking wine together in a quiet Santa Fe restaurant. They were feeling good and laughing. Their clerical collars were unsnapped and loose. Like ecclesiastical taxi cabs with the off-duty lamp lit.

Father Portacomaro said, “You know my friend, I wonder if our good Bishop will ever merge our flocks. Neither is growing much and our budgets are shrinking.”

“A marriage of two congregations, so long as the shepherds are retained, might be an equitable and a timely sacrament of union,” replied Father Clark. As often as not, priests were reassigned; however, in this diocese there were not a plethora of thriving Catholic churches. There was also no plethora of ordained priests anymore.

Frank continued, “But it would be a shotgun-sacrament, if our bishop ordered it,” and he snorted.

“The Protestants do mergers voluntarily, from what I have seen. And since the Cavern Fellowships has begun, I would not be surprised if several unions occur,” Marty opined.

“I must confess to you, my brother,” Frank said, “that I have become quite fond of them, with all that has happened. Do not misunderstand me. I am not pondering

becoming a Protestant, but I do appreciate this strange fellowship we are seeing between them."

"Yes," Marty agreed. "They are really helping each other. And Protestants are usually so competitive, even disdainful of each other."

"Ah…" Frank sighed. "Methinks our wayward brethren are growing on us, my friend. To them," Frank raised his wineglass in a mock-toast. To which Father Clark clinked his wineglass and said, "Amen! And I am sure we will, sooner or later, be called upon to repent, do penance and confess our wickedness to the bishop. May God and Mother Mary help us."

77

A year earlier, Bob Cohen, Mindy McConnell, Jim Pappas, or Karen Asnat did not know each other, much less could they have predicted their new friendships. To any outside watcher, an evening dinner engagement between two Jews, two *goyim*, two reporters, a scientist, and a Navy SEAL might seem unlikely. But the two couples had become friends and were dining together. With no prescience or plan they had fallen into and all liked their mutual chemistry.

This night they were enjoying a somewhat elegant dining experience at Geronimo, which was an upscale Borrego House built by Geronimo Lopez in 1756 with thick adobe walls, kiva fireplaces, and wooden beams.  Even though Cohen felt out of place, McConnell was annoyed, and Asnat was slightly embarrassed, Pappas had insisted that their friendship deserved at least the occasional bit of high-life enjoyment on this Saturday night.

Mindy had a shrugging go along/get along attitude, and not knowing who was paying for what, she ordered a first course of lobster bisque. Karen joined in and ordered the Fujisaki Asian pear salad.

Bob Cohen and Jim Pappas declined a first course and hungrily waited for their dates to finish. Cohen noted, "The longer I wait the more I will enjoy," and Pappas nodded in agreement.



Cohen read from the menu, "Tellicherry Rubbed Elk Tenderloin with roasted garlic fork-mashed potatoes, sugar snap peas, applewood-smoked bacon, and creamy brandied mushroom sauce. I'm down with that."

Pappas' eyebrow rose and, not to be outdone, he read "Mesquite grilled lobster tails, with angel hair pasta," he glanced at Karen, "spinach, edamame, and creamy garlic chili sauce."

*Two angels were present, unbeknownst to the diners of course. One looked at the other, and slightly flipped his blonde locks. The other one said nothing but smiled ever so slightly.*

Mindy and Karen both ordered New Mexico Four Corners rack of lamb and jointly smirked at the men. They suspected that each entrée would be more than either of them could finish, but it was a coup to out-order the men. They each loved the moment. They all shared an expensive bottle of wine. The bill was in excess of three hundred dollars, but Pappas nobly put it on his card. Cohen pulled out a fifty-dollar bill and handed it to Pappas to add for the gratuity. Each man was supremely proud of himself. And, as by design, both women were charmed.

Other diners came and went, and at one point a nicely dressed Hispanic man and a lovely escort entered and walked by, to be seated several tables away. It was Sergio Sánchez and a cover-hire, just for the evening. They ignored Cohen and friends, and enjoyed a lovely dinner together, doing nothing to draw attention to themselves. In fact, the female partner with Sergio had no idea why they were here. She simply enjoyed a lovely dinner provided by a charming male and made herself two hundred dollars for her trouble.

As the evening progressed Bob, Mindy, James, and Karen all had a fine time. None was in a hurry. There was no intrigue. The conversation never turned snarky, and all were happy, wine notwithstanding. After about two hours they got into Mindy's car and drove back to Pappas' apartment. Jim got out, first to be dropped off, and Karen said, "I'll walk you to your door, sir," got out and put her arm in his and walked up to his door. Then she took his head in her hands and kissed him. He was slightly stunned and fell back a half step, then grabbed her and planted a lengthy return-kiss. Neither said a word. Karen turned and went back to Mindy's car. The

look on her face was mirth and the warmth in her heart was something she had never felt before.

Mindy and Bob, of course, were fascinated but said nothing on the way to Karen's place. Finally, Bob said, "Me next! Me next!" which drew a slap on the shoulder from Mindy to which Karen smartly chirped, "Not on this planet, sir. This real estate is reserved." She squeezed Mindy on the shoulder, and exited, watched to her door by her friends.

Mindy commented, backing out of the parking lot, "My oh my, what are we seeing, my news-hound friend?"

"I see nothing, I hear nothing," Bob responded in his very bad but well-practiced Sergeant Schultz accent, which made Mindy laugh.

* * * * *

Mindy let Bob out at his RV and said, "G'night, Mr. Santa Fe Day," squeezed his hand in lieu of a kiss and drove off. As he got into his home, Bob popped the top on his last beer for the evening and calmly thought to fast-forward through his camera feeds. He came fully alert as he saw a shadowy figure, from three hours earlier, recorded slowly walking around his RV within his detection zone. The figure was shrouded in a dark hoodie, suggesting a deliberate effort to be unidentifiable. The person did nothing that Bob could see; just walked around a couple of times.

"Hmm, could be nothing, could be a random thief checking to see if there's anything to steal and could be . . ." His kneejerk reaction was to check for his Glock. It was in its holster, in the drawer of his desk. He had not taken it with him to dinner. He sat in the semi-darkness for a couple of minutes and thought*, this was three hours ago. I had just left for dinner.*

Bob Cohen had slowly risen on the *Demônios* alert chart over the past year. Now, he was deemed a serious threat to their commerce and a *pessoa de interesse,* mimicking the American law enforcement term. He was a known media-personality and a few knew that he was also a capable combatant and not to be taken lightly. Sergio Sánchez was given the task by Julio Hernandez of keeping an eye on him. Sergio was no rookie. He was very careful. He had three different vehicles at his



disposal, a disguise kit, a large wardrobe in various categories of *mercería*; and of course, a small arsenal of weaponry—including RPGs.

It had not occurred to Sergio that there might be a surveillance system engaged for someplace as simple as a recreational vehicle. He was caught on video surveilling Cohen's place. It was part of Cohen's own competence to do tactical things unexpected by one's perceived enemy. No one knew this, but Cohen even possessed two M18A1 Claymore anti-personnel mines with trip-wire set-ups. These were not kept in his RV but rather in his Jeep in a secret hatch he had contrived himself, after-market he always quipped to himself. For some reason be imagined his home could be compromised before his Jeep and these were valuable assets, not easily replaced. He also found it darkly humorous that the mines had embossed on them, FRONT TOWARD ENEMY.

# The Attack

78

On Sunday morning, among the people of Santa Fe Christian Assembly, Pastor Victor Moniz and his wife Rosaria were doing what they loved to do. She listened to her husband's sermon and taught her Sunday School class of women. He preached and greeted people and enjoyed the music of worship. His sermon that day, given to about sixty adults, was entitled "If Jesus Wasn't Who He Said He Was." Victor was in rare form, Rosaria thought, and he said,

"If Jesus was not Who the Old Testament prophets said He would be, Who He Himself said He was, Who the apostles said He was, and Who countless millions of Christians ever since believed He was . . . then there is much tragic loss and tomfoolery to account for. Who would play such a cosmic and cruel joke on Planet Earth? If belief in Jesus was and is ultimately fraudulent, then all the people who believed and trusted in Him were fools. They were duped. They showed themselves sadly gullible. They bought a lie. All the missionaries who ever went out to talk about Jesus were selling a scam. All the good works achieved under the banner of Jesus Christ—hospitals, schools, human services organizations and on and on—were set up on a lie. All the money given by people over the centuries, often hard earned, was given to a lie. All the famous people who believed in Jesus were at best believers of a fantasy and at worst shameful shysters. Mother Theresa was an idiot. Billy Graham was an evil imposter. All the churches that were ever built were and are monuments to a falsehood. And anything with the name Christian attached to it is a cruel joke. If Jesus was not Who we have believed He was, that belief, by anyone who holds it, is the greatest cosmic fantasy and lie ever bought! Much is at stake with what we stand for, dear ones."

Rosaria's heart swelled with pride. She loved it when Victor was focused and hitting home with his message.

Sitting in the small congregation that day, was a young woman who was a visitor, as evangelical churches tended to call them. Her name was Julianna Namara and she happened to be a cousin to Heather Marcos a.k.a. Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia. Back in Mexico, their mothers were sisters. Julianna was twenty-two years old and a prostitute, but in no way officially connected to the *Demônios Elevados*, as was Heather. In fact, she came to Santa Fe from Mexico City, as a



trafficked young woman and at first did not even know that her cousin, Maria, lived here.

During this past week, Julianna had met another young woman, a social worker, who had invited her to visit the worship service at Santa Fe Christian Assembly on this particular Sunday. The social worker's name was Sally. Julianna was in a hard and desperate place. She felt trapped in her occupation, with little money and little possibility of returning home. Her parents were both alive, devoted Roman Catholics and not completely unhappy that their daughter was in the United States and out of their sphere of responsibility now. She was a very pretty but sad woman. She had turned three tricks the previous night and was both routinely humiliated and exhausted. Her pimp demanded half the income which left her with about seventy dollars. She put fifty-five of it under her bed in her room. The other fifteen she placed in a small purse and brought it with her to church.

As Julianna and Sally sat together through the service, and Pastor Moniz shared his message, something deep inside Julianna's mind or soul or heart was being stirred. She had been raised to go to Mass, do the sacrament of reconciliation whenever possible, always show respect to the clergy, and pray to Mary. She did not know much actually about Jesus and certainly nothing about the Protestant idea of grace. But this pastor was speaking about Jesus as though He was the main thing, as though Jesus Himself was what, or who, their whole faith hung upon. This pastor said nothing about obligations, confession, or Mary. He made faith a lot simpler and, she thought for a moment, *limpiadora*, or cleaner.

Church ended, kind and good parting words were said between all, and Julianna walked with Sally to her car. The pastor had not asked anything of the attendees and Julianna sort of wished he had. "That's it?" she asked Sally.

"That's what?" Sally said.

"That's it? Jesus. There he is. What do I do now?"

Sally was a little put off. She was always interested in taking people to church, but here was a woman who wanted more. *What do I do now?* she asked herself.

“Let’s get some lunch, shall we?” giving herself some breathing room and time to think about what to do next. They pulled into the Chinese place, went in, and sat at a simple table. They scanned a lengthy menu and ordered wonton soup and an order of General Tso’s chicken to share.

They sipped small cups of tea, and Julianna said, “Sally, thank you for taking me to church. But I am not sure what I do now.”

Sally said, “Julianna, do you believe in Jesus?”

“Of course, I do,” Julianna said immediately. “Who doesn’t?”

Sally went on, “It is more than simply agreeing that Jesus exists or existed. He wishes to come into our lives.”

“What? I don’t want anybody coming into my life any more than I already have, which is more than I want,” and tears came down her cheek.

Sally took her by the hand. She knew this was an important moment for Julianna. She continued. “I understand, but Jesus is real. And He wishes to become not only your Savior but your Lord. And He will never hurt you. He only wishes to make your life better. And He promises forgiveness for all our sins. Permanently. No shame and no guilt. That is why He died on the cross for us.”

“My life is *ruina*, Sally. I am a *prostita*,” now she really began to weep.

“Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, Julianna, and became one of Jesus’s closest followers. Jesus forgives and calls us to trust Him and follow Him. That is what the pastor was aiming at this morning,” Sally explained.

“You said ‘us,’ Sally. You do good for people. Surely you are not a sinner,” Julianna suggested.

Sally laughed quietly, looked away and then looked back at Julianna. “I must disagree, Julianna. I am as much of a sinner as you or anyone else. We are all broken by sin. We each have our own . . . *guardarropa* of sin and none of us can rid ourselves of our own sin. We are clothed in the rags of our own rebellion. We didn’t



ask to be sinful and no one forced us to become sinful. We just are. Even if we wear a Derek Lam Fatima dress on the outside, we are still *arruinada* on the inside. This is what Jesus can take care of for us, by faith. We ask Him. He responds. He takes our sinfulness upon Himself on the cross.”

Here they sat in a small, humble Chinese restaurant, in New Mexico, far from her home. She had two tricks scheduled for this evening. She could not feel more ashamed of herself, and Sally was speaking about something almost too wonderful to be true. Julianna had no problem with Sally’s use of the word *arruinada.* Yes. That was it. She was ruined on the inside. Each workday she arranged her hair attractively, her make-up, her clothing, checked her twenty nails for imperfections. She almost never performed badly, or differently from what was expected. She had learned how to work the johns to her own efficiency. But she knew what she did was depraved, *depravada.* And this preacher today, and this woman seemed to think that Jesus was real, didn’t make sin less than it was, and still cared about her, and would enter her life in some kind of redeeming way. Could this be real, she wondered. She also felt a strange and dark certainty—somewhere in her consciousness—that if she did not act now, this opportunity would pass.

“Sally, I want what you say. But I do not know what to do,” Julianna said, with tears.

“Let me pray—aloud—I know that sounds strange, and then you can do it too. How about that?” Sally said, with great gentleness. Julianna felt no threat and nodded in agreement.

Sally bowed her head, waited a moment to clear her own mind, and began, “Lord, I thank you for this day. I thank you for the church and this pastor and what he said today. Would you give Julianna faith to trust you with her life. Lord Jesus, I know you love her so much that you gave your life for us. Please show her that love.”

Sally didn’t close the prayer in any of the usual ways. She looked up at Julianna, who was looking at her. Sally smiled at her and then bowed her head again, in a prompt for Julianna.

Julianna slowly bowed her own head. She looked at the floor, glanced at the Chinese lady who was busy putting buns of some kind into the display case. She looked at the floor again and closed her eyes. She very quietly said, “*Señor* Jesus,”

then tears spilled out of her eyes. “I need you. Like Sally said,” and she faltered for a moment. “. . . and if you are real, would you help me? I believe in you and I always have but now I really need you to be here. I know I am *pecadora*. I know I am a sinner.” She went on, her voice quiet, like this was an important moment and she knew it. “Here I am *Señor* Jesus. I will wait for you. Amen. Do I say Amen, Sally?” and Sally laughed.

“Yes, that is good,” and then she said “Amen,” too. She got up and hugged Julianna, and she returned the embrace, and there were many tears all around. Even the Chinese lady had tears as she was now watching. She said, “You did good thing, pretty lady. Now you watch to see Lord Jesus appear.”

It was a critical moment for Julianna. It was not a simple whisking away of all the hardships in her life and somehow she did not expect such. Sally dropped her off at her flat and told her she would call her in a couple of days. She also opened her wallet and gave her the last twenty-dollar bill she had. She related the encounter to Rosaria Moniz in a call that evening, and Rosaria assured her that Julianna’s name would be added to her own prayer list and offered that she would be willing to help, if needed. Rosaria shared it with Victor and they both had that rare joy together, on a tired Sunday evening, which did not come along too often.

*An angel had observed the whole thing, present in the Chinese restaurant but, of course, unseen. The angel was fascinated and said to himself, “This never gets old. Praise and glory to the Lamb and to the Spirit who is so good.” He had seen such moments millions of times and he could recall everyone, but never presumed to predict when they would occur and evaluated each one as magnificently fascinating. He uttered, in a language unknown to humans, “May I be privileged to provide tactical cover for this young daughter of Eve?”*

79

In his mind, Sergio Sánchez had Robert Cohen in the crosshairs. He had carefully walked Cohen’s property once, undetected so far as he knew. He gleaned no useful information on that and left no trace of his visit—so he assumed. He was a professional, after all. And while he held Cohen with some respect in his thinking, he also never lacked for his own confidence and commitment to purpose, which was an undying loyalty to his cousin and to the *Demônios* mission. Julio had



articulated it many times as “the retributional and profitable undermining of the American imperialist and capitalist injustices, via the innovative trafficking of destructive narcotics into the populous infrastructure.” Julio certainly did not lack literary and political eloquence.

* * * * *

Maegan Grimley was having a cup of hot tea in her apartment, looking over the last Hit-G design project which was nearly complete. Gnawing at her was the untouched work of designing a new Southwest Evangelical Free Church. It was a Friday evening and she thought to call Rosaria Moniz and inquire about The Drawing and if it was still safe and secure. She took her cell and found the Monizes’ number.

“Good evening, Maegan,” was Rosaria’s response.

“Hi Rosaria. Am I calling at a bad time?” Maegan asked.

“No, not at all,” Rosaria said. “We just finished dinner and were wondering what to do tonight. It is a rare Friday night with nothing on the calendar,” and she laughed.

“I was wondering about that drawing,” Maegan said, quietly. “I know you all have probably forgotten about it. It’s been some months since we found it.”

“Yes, it’s here still, and we have not spoken of it to anyone. What was it you wanted to know?”

“I feel like I need to look at it again. Would that be possible?”

“Of course, it would be possible. Come on over this evening, if you want, and we’ll have a visit and look over the thing together.”

“If you’re sure you don’t mind?” Maegan started to sound nervous.

“How about a half hour from now? I can send Frank to the market for some ice cream,” Rosaria asked.

“Oh my, that would be great. I’ll see you soon,” and both hung up.

* * * * *

Frank and Rosaria had placed The Drawing in an old department store box which dated to the 1960s and came from Macy’s in New York. To Rosaria, it was a keepsake, but as it happened it was the perfect size for The Drawing. They had placed a large piece of tissue paper, folded in half around The Drawing and gently placed it in the box and taped the ends. They kept the box under their bed.

Maegan arrived, with a droll kind of cheerfulness and they all sat down to tea and bowls of rocky road ice cream. Frank brought out the box and placed it on the table. Maegan became nervous and asked, “Pastor, would you open it up please?”

He said, “Open Sesame,” smiling, but neither woman thought it was funny. He scowled and snipped the tape on the ends. He removed the top and all three gasped. The Drawing was gone.

“Where is it?” asked Maegan.

“I don’t know. We put it in here that last night after it was found, right, Rosaria?” Frank explained.

“That is right, we did. And we haven’t touched it since,” said Rosaria.

Maegan was crushed, felt betrayed somehow, but then realized that the couple was in the dark just as much as she was. She ran her hands along the inside of the box, as if that would make The Drawing appear. The tissue was there but no drawing.

Suddenly she was taken aback—it felt as though it were there. “It’s here,” she said, “we just can’t see it!”

Frank felt in the box. “It is indeed,” he said. His wife then placed her hand inside the box and she also felt The Drawing.



All three then stepped back, as if on some cue. Frank pulled back the top layer of wrapping tissue and then, to the amazement of all three, The Drawing appeared. It had been invisible and now it was not. It was visible. It was right there.

Frank said, “Okay, let’s say that didn’t just happen.” He took a deep breath and sighed, “So Maegan, here’s your drawing, just as we left it.” All of them were unsettled at what they had witnessed.

Maegan took The Drawing out and laid it on the table. It appeared as it had before except the strange writing was not there, just the artwork. She sat down and held the drawing up to the light, peered at its edges, looked closely at the lines themselves then announced, “Look at this! There’s dimensional specifications here and there were none before. Are you sure no one has tampered with this?”

Frank said, “Nobody has been into our bedroom, save us, Maegan. It has not been messed with at all.”

“I am sorry. But these fine dimensions were not here before. And look at this—that writing that was strange before, is gone now.” And they all looked at something that was new. In its place was a small box that had beautiful block lettering, in a font that none of them had ever seen. The box said,

Southwest Evangelical Free Church

בניין חדש

“That’s Hebrew,” Frank noted. “It says, I think, ‘new building.’”

Maegan was transfixed. Rosaria went to get another bowl of ice cream.

“There you have it, Maegan,” Frank said, with a strange confidence. “You’re supposed to use this gift as some kind of template for your replacement building. I think that is clear, don’t you think?”

Maegan hardly heard him, she was so fascinated by the drawing because the more she peered at it, the more ideas came to her head. She said, “Pastor, would you please hold on to this for a while?”

* * * * *

Bob Cohen sat. He was brooding. He thought to himself, *I'm being watched. Better that I take the initiative. I need to set a trap for you, Oh Demôniosoes. Who can I get to help me?* He drove to Mindy's place.

Cohen sat in his Jeep and looked around carefully for fifteen minutes. Then, convinced there were no *Elevated Demons* around, he knocked on Mindy's door. Nothing for a few minutes, then the door opened and she said, "Sir if we're going to keep meeting like this, I'll need a new camo wardrobe," and laughed at her own levity, even though she saw Bob had a serious look on his face. "I'll pay for the camo face paint," he said, playing along with the humor and then said, "Grab your coat and walk with me, please."

They walked up the street, not talking, then back down her street and past her place. They walked a few hundred yards into a dark field. It was breezy and warm. He said, "Okay, here is good." She said nothing, then he began to explain. "Mindy, I'm fairly sure I'm being watched."

"Do you know by who?" she asked.

"You know who, and I wouldn't be surprised if you're being watched too, but I don't know that. I have history. These guys want me, or they think they want me. So, I need to do something to bring them out in the open," he continued.

She was scared now. This conversation was going places she didn't want to go. She liked the guy—maybe even cared about him—but she wasn't sure she was willing to get shot for him.

"Why are we out here in a field at night?" she asked nervously, looking around.

"I know it's creepy," he agreed. "But out here I know for certain we are not seen and not listened to. My place might be bugged. My Jeep might be bugged. I've checked all around and found nothing, but my knowledge of electronic stuff is limited. So here we are. I needed to consult with someone I trust."

"Gee, kind sir, I am flattered. But forgive me if I don't want to get into another gun battle with you if I don't have to," and she was not being sarcastic.



"Yes, I understand," Cohen conceded. "And believe it or not, I have no desire to do the O.K. Corral thing again either. But I am certain I am being targeted. I want you to help me set a trap. I will need an off-site communications person. You, I trust. And you're smart. And fast on your feet. That's what I need. At least help me think it through. I won't place you in any danger. But this shit isn't going away, I am afraid. These guys are serious and seriously dangerous. And as I think you know, they have a way of holding a grudge. For years."

"Can't you go to the police?" she said, and immediately knew that was both a predictable thing to say, and useless. Not with a former Navy SEAL.

"I could," he said and it surprised her. "In fact, I may do that too, carefully. Calling the cops and ratting out the bad guys will get me nothing—and who knows, they might be bugged too. But Duvall knows the score. I may talk to him, off the record. He was straightforward with the pastors and their security patrol. Under the radar. Plus, I like the guy."

She sat on the ground. "Sitting down gives us a lower profile, right? Who knows who might have us in their scope right now?" she said.

"True, girl, but only if they have NVGs. You might make a commando yet," and he chuckled. "Maybe I like you a little too."

"Shaddup sailor. Now what do you have in mind?"

* * * * *

Julio was drinking a glass of fine wine and Sergio and Heather were smoking weed. They were using what used to be called a bong, drawing the smoke up through the same wine that Julio was sipping.

"Serg, this is very fine leaf—very smooth, very bourgeois, and Julio, the wine is marvelous," Heather said. She was as relaxed as she ever had been.

Sergio said, "Yes, my darling. It is. From a very, as you say, bourgeois farm that I know of," and winked.

Julio was thinking, sipping his glass slowly. “We must do some planning, Sergio. Another set of art purchases is being shipped here in three days. We must plan to receive them. Art, you know, deserves the most careful and meticulous reception.”

Sergio replied on script, “Yes indeed, *Mi Capitãn*. It does indeed.”

“I do not think the same kind of drop off could be in order, however. I still grieve the loss of those fine works of impressionism,” Julio continued, in a pseudo-intellectual voice.

Heather knew exactly what they were speaking about, and certainly played along with the ruse. They all knew their home was clean of any bugging by any authorities but it was good to stay in practice.

“I have an idea,” she said. “How about in plain sight?”

“I am intrigued, *pequeño,”* said Julio, coming forward in his easy chair.

“I am little only in stature, Julio. I run with the leopards,” she shot, annoyed at his diminutive term.

“I mean no offense. It is a term of endearment in the town in which Sergio and I grew up. It is reserved for the most delicate flower, whose pistil stings with deadly poison any admirer who gets too close,” Julio parried.

“And sting, she can,” Sergio said looking admiringly at Heather.

“What is on your mind, Maria?” Julio inquired. “What are you seeing?”

She shook off the tension and said, “What if a delivery of art arrived at the capitol for the state gallery . . . and we orchestrate a media event so that everybody is watching. While the art is being off-loaded, so is our delivery off-loaded at the same time. It would be packaged in such a way as to look like a routine part of the art acquisition. Perhaps, in the cartons with the mounting hardware.”



“Since Sergio was not seen on the day of the demise of that ridiculous sculpture, he could be *in cognito* and playing a wonderful role in the . . .” she thought for a second, “*Gran obra de teatro*—the Great Performance!”

“Interesting, Brezo,” commented Sergio, “If that intrusive journalist is around, perhaps there might be a way to neutralize him at the same time. I have been watching him. He moves like a snake. Our futures would be happier if people like him were just . . . *sumido*.”

“It is risky, *pequeño,*” Julio thought, “but it has elegance. And perhaps some elegance is what the stage calls for now. The media, the governor and even national attentions have come our way. And this next delivery will be our most profitable.”

* * * * *

Lieutenant Bruce Philipsburg was flying an Air Guard check flight with two other pilots in a HH60G Pave Low. Their unit had received three aircraft recently. They were re-deployed from front line units elsewhere, and these pilots were only too happy to receive them. Each chopper required various scenario simulation flights, acquainting the pilots with the specific aircraft and also with ever-evolving protocols for their use. They were not DEA or FBI but Air Force. Their mission was to be available at the governor’s call or to any state or national emergency.

They had flown to the north and over the Carson National Forest, then west over both the Apache and Navajo reservations. This was not specifically prohibited, but most of the time Air Guard flights would avoid Native American reservations out of respect for the air space. The Pave Low flew on this day over those lands because their pristine and unpopulated nature was a good representation of narcotics entry points.

*In a strange and wonderful irony, an angel of the Lord flew alongside the Pave Low. It was Kuriosagapa. He moved alongside, effortless, unseen, majestic. Watching.*

Darkness was falling as the helicopter flew over Valles Caldera Preserve, a beautiful and rugged area. Philipsburg was not at the command controls. He was watching the dusky beauty pass beneath him with his night vision goggles enjoying the glowing alternative view. Suddenly he spotted something curious.

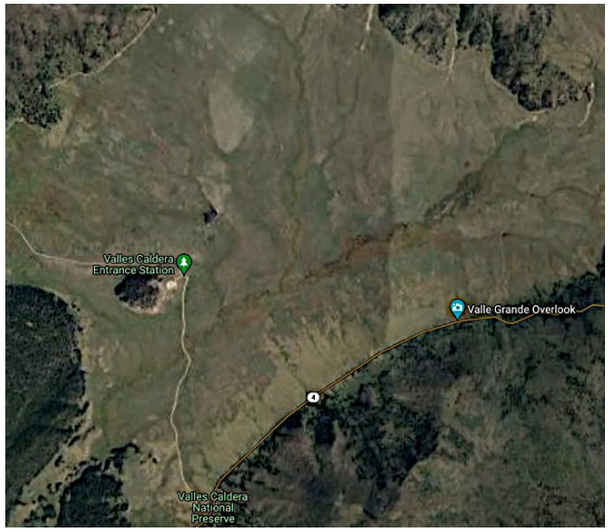
*The angel of course, saw the same.*

About a mile east of the Valles Caldera Entrance Station sat four vans, parked well off Route 4, in the field. Several figures were moving objects between the vans, then the chopper was past them.

Philipsburg directed the younger lieutenant who was flying the bird, “Bring us widely around and overfly that station again, but make a five-mile arc and come back over from a mile or so further northeast, so we appear as a different unit,”

“Yes sir,” was the simple reply.

“We need another look-see at those vans, but with as much discretion as possible.” Then he directed the other officer to fire up the surveillance recording cameras. The forward-looking infrared system didn’t hurt either.




The Pave Low came in over the vans and made a photo-recon record of what was below. The video was instantly uploaded via satellite to Kirtland. The file would automatically be cleaned up and enhanced by software and ready for their viewing upon arrival, if they so wished. Philipsburg so wished.



* * * * *

As the rotors were slowing almost to a stop, and the other two younger lieutenants were completing the post-flight check list, Philipsburg headed directly over to the Aerial Reconnaissance Photo Lab on the base. He made his way through the security gates, the key swipes, and signed in on a clip board. He approached the lab’s entry counter where a serious looking female airman was at post. She asked to see his ID although she knew who he was. That done, she showed him to a computer terminal and he logged on and began viewing the video they had shot earlier.

As the video revealed the four vans from their overflight, he zoomed in and paused. One of the vans had writing on the side and roof, Department of Historic Preservation. He thought it odd that that department would need their trucks identified from above. He forwarded the video to his own secure e-mail address, logged that transfer into the security portal, told the airman that he had done so, was offered another clipboard to record the transfer. He noted to her, “Clip boards? I thought those went out with the electric light bulb?” The airman was not amused and commented dryly, “We never outgrow the need for hard copy, sir.” Philipsburg smiled and said, “Yes, you are so right. I get too wrapped up in the ‘cloud’ sometimes. Carry on.”

“Yes sir,” she replied, “Have a good evening, sir.”

* * * * *

Much was at stake with the next narcotics delivery, not the least of which was the continued freedom of Julio, Sergio, and Heather, not to mention the delivery people who would be masquerading as fine arts couriers. But Julio determined the cleverness of Heather’s idea had great merit. A delivery for loan of two Impressionist masterpieces, fakes of course, was announced as a gift to the State of New Mexico. They would be delivered with all appropriate mounting and display equipment as well as a new layer of security equipment on the morning of three days hence.

Heather Marcos offered to be the official receiver of the gifts at the front lobby. She said she knew the donors and could arrange the media entourage. She was not a PR person, but the governor approved and knew that Heather was capable and could well handle the assignment.

* * * * *

A chain communication had begun from Air Guard Lieutenant Philipsburg, Jim Pappas, Bob Cohen, and Trooper Aaron Duvall. All four were now chatting about conspiratorial endeavor afoot. The vans were being checked for authenticity when Philipsburg tipped Pappas as to what he had viewed.

“Do your department’s vans have roof identification, which would be visible from a thousand feet altitude?” Pappas answered flatly, “No.”

Pappas had passed that bit of intel on to Cohen who, in addition to watching his own six, was professionally interested in the entry on to the news scene of the art loans to state capitol. His radar popped when he learned that the coordinator for the arrival of the pieces would be Heather Marcos from the governor’s general staff as well as the governor herself.

Duvall was also interested in Heather Marcos, as he was now paying attention to any public movements by her. So far as he knew, she was not aware of any interest on his part, and Duvall wanted to keep it that way.

Cohen was trying to think up a way to draw out the front line *Demônios,* or at least the leading edge of them. He had consulted with Officer Duvall, in confidence, and learned that a plan was taking shape involving Duvall, McConnell and now himself as off-site communications operatives.

Cohen then enlisted Detective Brant Taylor of the Santa Fe Police as a team member in this developing plan. He, in turn, was authorized to let his partner, Detective Sylvia Morrisette, in on the operation. She would team with Mindy for logistical support be Mindy’s backup on communications.

Finally, because he was thought to be a wild card asset, but had earned some respect from Cohen on the day of the first attack on Pastor Menendez, Father



Marty Clark was approached to be part of the plan as an official clergy presence at the time of the arrival of the art. He was advised not to inform any of his other ministerial colleagues.

The idea was to let it be known that Cohen would be doing a live broadcast for Santa Fe Today at the time of delivery, thinking his publicized presence would make him an easy target. Duvall and Taylor also enlisted a small number of SWAT officers, hidden, armed, and equipped for surveillance.

The governor’s office was not privy to the minutiae of this plan, except for her security detail, Carlos and Bill. Cohen had come to trust the two gubernatorial aides, who were reminded to continue to be vigilant with her personal security at this open public event.

In this case *need to know* was important. Cohen, Duvall, McConnell, Taylor, Morrisette, Carlos and Bill, plus the four SWAT team members, and finally, Father Clark. Twelve people knew about this. They were not all aware of each other, and if they all did their parts, they did not need to know the other parts of the plan.

There were knowns, unknowns, and variables in all high-stakes operations. First, it seemed that the *Demônios Elevados* were not aware of any specific risks of a trap, a thing Cohen wanted to safeguard as an *unknown*. Cohen did not want the jaws of the trap to be so openly plain that it would tip the gang off. Too many times, Cohen had seen law enforcement, out of brazen arrogance or naïve stupidity, foil their own plans by tipping their hand.

Another known, was that it appeared completely unknown to the *Demônios* gang that Heather had been suspected and surveilled. Sufficient history had been played out with the *Demônios Elevados* that a shoot to kill green light had been quietly communicated to all armed officers if an altercation arose. The *Demônios* members certainly would be doing so.

An unknown was how many gang members would be deployed to take out Cohen. The identities of the gang members—other than the art guy who had been stopped on the day of the RPG attack—were completely unknown. As much as could be known, the integrity of The Twelve, as Cohen was calling them, was secure. None of them gave any indication that they might be suspected of leaking the plan.

* * * * *

Bob Cohen was sitting in his RV and Mindy was visiting. It was two days before the art arrival was scheduled, and they were drinking yet another designer couple of beers. He said, “You know Mindy, I wonder why the FBI has not shown up with all this outrageous activity in our city. Two violent events involving murders, a known gang insurgency, an RPG attack for goodness’s sake, bogus vans in the wilderness, and a state governor who is making noise in Washington that New Mexico has a drug problem involving deadly doses of fentanyl inside legitimate medication packaging.”

Mindy sipped her bottle and replied, “Yeah,” and continued to stare out the window.

“Gee, Ms. CNN, don’t overtalk the subject,” he quipped.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re right. Why haven’t there been federal agents all over this city? I don’t know. My mind is just out there, two days from now, you know? It’s like we’re being the FBI because you think they’re after you.”

Cohen’s eyebrow raised, but then she tried to back-peddle. “I know, you *are* being targeted. Christmas Eve made that clear. I want this all to be over. I want to be safe, not watching over my shoulder all the time. I want to carry a .22 again too,” and Cohen laughed loudly.

“Now that is funny, ma’am, I have to say. I have never known anyone to equate a lowering of stress with the decreasing of muzzle size.” She laughed too.

“Well, you know the feeling,” she said.

“I do young lady, I do indeed,” Cohen said in an unusually comforting tone of voice. “And I think that three days from now we might have come to something of a conclusion of this chapter. But I have not forgotten the most bizarre Santa Fe mystery in recent memory. The Hit-G thing. Have you?”



“No, not really. I’m a news person and from a purely journalistic perspective the solving of that mystery would get me, um, three dollars more an hour,” and they both laughed at that.

“Bob, can I ask you something?” she said quietly.

“Shoot. Damn. I gotta lose that word,” and they both laughed yet again. The beer was easing the tension, but then she got serious. “How old are you?”

Cohen sat back. He was not expecting a question like that from her. He looked at her. “This gonna be in your next piece for CNN?”

She looked at him, strangely, almost warmly.

“I’m forty-six,” he said. “And how old are you, Miss Looks-Like-She’s-22?”

“I’m thirty-eight,” she said, “And if you tell anyone I will shoot your ass,” and once again they both roared.

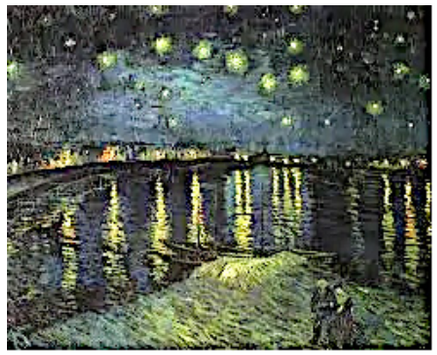
She got up to leave before things got out of hand, and he motioned for her to step back so he could exit the RV first. His Glock was in his hand and he led her to her car. He kissed her on the forehead and said, “Take care, little lady,” in a bad John Wayne imitation. Instead, she looked him in the eye and kissed him on the mouth—more than a peck but less than sexual. “Thanks for the beer, kind sir. I will talk to you tomorrow. If you’re lucky.”

“Text me when you get inside your apartment,” he said acting as if the kiss was routine. It was not.

“You got it, sailor,” she called out and drove off.

He sat at his desk, tasting the blend of beer and her lipstick, savoring it as long as it lasted. Then he fell asleep with his booted feet up on the desk. Robert Cohen had not fallen asleep that content in many years. Her text came through, but he was snoring.

* * * * *



80

It was the luckiest of coincidences. Julio and the others were expecting a fake art delivery and then they learned that a genuine delivery was coming.

The first of the two paintings on loan to the State of New Mexico was Claude Monet's *Woman With a Parasol,* which was painted in 1875 and measures 3' 3" x 2' 8" and is owned by the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. It is worth an estimated $110 million. That alone makes it an extraordinary loan, but Governor Grimley was herself known as a patron of the arts and this arrangement was considered a good public relations move for her.



The other painting was *Starry Night Over the Rhône* by Vincent van Gogh, measuring 28" x 36.2" and painted in 1889. It is valued anywhere between $200 and $300 million dollars and is held by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

Both masterpieces were being carefully transported from Mexico City where they had previously been on loan. Their stay in Santa Fe was planned for one month exactly, before they each returned to their home galleries. The route of delivery of course, was confidential and the governor had dispatched a sizable state police escort, configured along with a small SWAT detachment, closely paralleling the state police team.

As a third tactical measure, she also requested and was granted a New Mexico Air Guard surveillance helicopter overflight to coordinate with the state police during the transport once it crossed into the United States from Mexico.

Finally, the governor hired two highly skilled, plain clothes, and otherwise unknown security experts whose names were suggested to her by network administrator Heather Marcos. Their credentials were checked out and found to be impeccable. They specialized in valuable art transport and together the two men possessed thirty-seven years of experience. While they were not well known in the art world, they were not total strangers, either. The governor assigned their security checks to the State Police Security Division. They found nothing questionable and one of the officers remarked, "They come on recommendation of Ms. Marcos. If there was anything sketchy about either of the two, she would not have recommended them." Matter closed.

* * *

If there was anything sketchy going on, it was in the mind of Robert Cohen. He knew two things: *Demônios Elevados* was watching him with no good intent. And second, Heather Marcos was a plant on the inside of the governor's confidence. It seemed to Cohen that anything big planned around the governor that involved Ms. Marcos must be some kind of subterfuge. He did not know what, yet, but he kept Officer Duvall appraised of the slightest indication of dark information.

Then Cohen learned of the planned art exposition and of the two masterpieces. He thought to himself, "Could there be a worse time to expose the capitol to some kind of danger?" Then the thought struck him, *if the Demônios have anything*

*cooking, they will know this is a great opportunity to draw me out—a huge media circus—they know I'll be there.*

He picked the same field where he had taken Mindy McConnell to talk. He chose a late hour and he invited her and Officer Duvall to meet that evening.

* * * * *

There was not much of a moon. It was overcast. Cohen, McConnell, and Duvall walked into the field and Mindy motioned the other two to the ground as she plopped down herself. Cohen laughed, "Mindy there isn't any moonlight to silhouette us."

She said, "Humor me."

"We all know about this delivery of valuable artwork to the capitol," Cohen began. The other two nodded and let him continue.

"I think that if the bad guys are paying any attention to this thing, they know the media will be dancing in the streets. They gotta know I will be there. I think this is a chance to at least dry run my plan. If they don't show or try to grab me during this thing, fine. We all get a training badge," and poked at the officer's TRS shoulder patch, Tactical Readiness School.

The arrival of the art masterpieces was announced for ten o'clock the morning of the fourteenth, two days hence. A crowd of onlookers, art enthusiasts, general art hipsters, and various news media was expected. The art itself would not be visible upon delivery but because of their fame and value there was a mystical and ethereal feeling about even seeing them heavily crated.

Duvall personally alerted the team members who would all be available except one of the SWAT members who had to travel to California as his mother had fallen seriously ill. Duvall made the decision that three SWAT participants would be sufficient—their placement around the capitol would be different with three instead of four members posted.



In his mind, it wasn't the accommodation of Cohen's desire to get his own profile erased from the *Demônios* terror agenda but the bigger problem of the *Demônios* incursion into the State of New Mexico with their narcotics trade. That was what Duvall, Governor Grimley, and any law enforcement agency around wanted to end. If the gang showed themselves at this event, with Cohen as bait, this might be the chance to make real progress with the problem.

However, if they showed themselves, it would not be benign. It would be quick and dramatic without a doubt. It did occur to him and to Cohen that somehow the gang might present itself in some preliminary way. But it was hoped that Cohen being so visible as a journalist might be a temptation too great for the gang to resist.

The two Santa Fe Police participants and the two gubernatorial aides were all informed and available for the event and Cohen brought McConnell up to speed on what he wished from her. Detective Morrisette would be posted on site and equipped with a special radio linked directly to Mindy, should there be any emergency needs. Mindy, as a news media entity would be the CNN journalist nearby, but out of sight. Her van with antenna would be plainly obvious from a block away, but Mindy would not be in it. An undercover Santa Fe police officer would be given the simple task to park it and walk away. Mindy would be in the Bataan building, at a window with a partial view of the front of the capitol. Cohen gave her a small set of binoculars.

The public presence of Detective Taylor and the governor's two aides would not seem unusual. The three SWAT members would arrive separately before sunrise on the morning of the operation, set up, and not be seen together. While SWAT assigned, they were technically called designated marksmen. They each had a Savage Arms 110 Apex Hunter XP Scoped 300 Winchester Magnum rifle plus their service sidearms.

* * * * *

Julio, Sergio, and Heather were quite proud of themselves. They thought they would need to construct a delivery of phony art in order to bring delivery of their next narcotics shipment from Brazil. But with the official delivery of the Impressionist masterpieces, they only needed to gain entry into the art community to participate and thus plant their own shipment inside one crate of secondary equipment.

That would necessitate two things. Julio would slip into Mexico and impersonate Manuel G. López, art scholar, lecturer, and art dealer. He would insist that his presence on the caravan would be an asset to the group. Second, at the right moment, he would place the legitimate medication cases inside a single crate. He could easily disguise himself as López and was certain that he could find the few moments necessary to place the cargo aboard into the crate.

Since no one in Mexico had ever seen Mr. López, and since Ms. Marcos was a wizard in the creation of fake credentials, she created official documents for both Sergio and Julio. They had driver's licenses, passports, library cards, and art society identification cards.

Julio was credentialed as Master Curator and Scholar of Her Majesty's Board of Rare and Exceptional Antiquities based in Manchester, U.K. He was also an official of the Department of Documentation and Research for the *Museo del Barro* in Asuncíon, Paraguay. This card was ornate and featured a swipe-strip suggesting special access within the *museo.* Heather also provided him with two sheets of specifications, history, and information about both positions for him to memorize and destroy. All of this seemed more than sufficient to validate Julio a.k.a. Manuel Lopez's inclusion on the transport trip to Santa Fe.

The distance from Mexico City to Santa Fe was a twenty-four hour, 1,400-mile drive that would be undertaken in one shot, with brief stops along the way. The last leg of the trip would be across the United States border. Julio would be providing added security for the treasures. He had a distinct way of convincing anyone near him of his *gravitas*, instilling assurance that he was an art scholar to be respected. Julio was full of confidence as he arrived at the museum in Mexico City to begin his masquerade.

* * * * *

Julio had three objectives. First and a priority for the *Demônios*—to complete the acquisition of the latest shipment of narcotics and its proper distribution. Payment would be wired to an offshore account. Second—to locate and to liquidate Robert Cohen. Third—on his own initiative—to liquidate the Governor of New Mexico.

No one had ordered this but the more Julio had become familiar with this governor's passion to exterminate the drug trade, the more strident became his own passion to eliminate her. He really didn't think of it as an assassination. It was



just business and eliminating a business obstacle. The art delivery event, he trusted, would accomplish all three objectives. He was not the least bit interested in the $400 million art treasures, a thing which he considered quite ironic. They were, he knew, not fencible anyway. Too hot. Too surveilled and plainly out of his league.

*The two masterpieces are the vehicle for my success,* Julio thought. *Could there be a better cover? Anyone even remotely aware of us will think the art is what we are after,* and Julio chuckled to himself. There were still many variables. But Sergio and Heather/Maria were not among them. They would give their lives for him as he would for them.

81

Julianna sat in her room, alone. She stared at her cell phone and then picked it up and called her mother in Mexico. Her *madre* was glad to hear her voice. "Julianna, are you okay? I have worried about you so much."

"Yes, Mama, I am well. In fact, I was wondering about my cousin, Maria? Isn't she here in the United States?"

"Yes *querida,* she is in New Mexico. Do you know where that is?" the woman said.

"Of course I do, Mama, that is where I am living," Julianna said with some small excitement.

"Really? Perhaps you should call her. She is very successful, or so *hermana* tells me," and laughed. She knew what her daughter did for a living, felt shame but also felt great love. It had been some time since her daughter had called her.

Julianna hesitated. Her own profession, while not so shameful in America, still drowned her in her own shame. She was not sure that she was up to calling a more successful cousin. But she was at a very vulnerable spot, especially since that day in church and her conversation with Sally.

"Can you send me her phone number, Mama?" she asked.

"I will find it and—how do they say— text it to you. It changes often, so I am told," and she was proud of using an American buzzword.

"*Si*, Mama, that would be fine. I will call her."

They chatted further about Julianna's health, diet, and details about her garden. Nothing was mentioned about Julianna's father. Then Julianna said, "I need to go, Mama. I will call again. I love you."

"*Te quiero, querida*. *Si, Si,* please do."

The text message arrived a few minutes later and Julianna decided to click the number for Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia, her cousin, three years older than herself. When they were younger, they liked to call each other Julianna and Juliet.

The phone answered, "Hello?" with an elegant sounding American accent. Julianna hesitated.

"*Hola, prima*?" Julianna went forward. Silence on the other end for a few seconds.

"Julianna? Oh my god! Is that you? Where are you?" Heather/Maria said excitedly. "What has it been—three years?"

"I suppose, *prima*. I was thinking about you and I called Mama and she was able to get your number from your Mama," and she laughed. "I thought I would call you. I am working in Santa Fe, New Mexico now."

"Working, yes, I understand. Julianna, you're not going to believe this," she stopped a moment, wondering if she should reveal her own location but decided it would be alright. "I am in Santa Fe also," and she heard Julianna squeal delightfully, a sound she always loved.

"Do you live here, too? Oh my god I would love to see you," said Julianna.

Heather switched to Spanish, "*Si, Si yo También*," then back to English, "I have a full day tomorrow—I work for the governor," she said proudly, "But I could meet you for an early breakfast."

"Yes," Julianna said. "Tell me when and where and I will be there."

"Can you do seven o'clock?" Heather asked. Julianna replied, "Yes, of course."



"Okay, find Alamos Brew coffee shop, and I will meet you there," Heather instructed, not even thinking that Julianna might need a ride.

"Yes, I can do that. I am so excited!" Julianna gushed. "I will see you then," and disconnected the call. She was intimidated by her older, apparently successful cousin but she very much wanted to see her.

*An angel was now assigned Julianna's overwatch. He took the task both seriously and joyfully. He was aware of the conversation and its implications. He also knew that Julianna had been genneithei anōthen, γεννηθῇ ἄνωθεν—born again. "How wonderful!" he said aloud. "This poor ewe has so much to live for now."*

* * * * *

Julianna walked into the coffee shop, stood in line behind a young couple who seemed strangely familiar to her. Karen Asnat and Jim Pappas were meeting there for breakfast too. She overheard the woman say, "Jim, I would like a small latte, please."

Julianna looked radiant and Karen noticed. "It was a beautiful sunrise. Did you see it?" she asked Julianna.

"I did and yes, it was," replied Julianna. "For some reason it felt like it was glowing right through me," she offered and then was embarrassed to share an intimate feeling with a stranger. Karen laughed and noticed again that this girl seemed extremely happy.

"I'm sorry," she said and laughed, "That must have sounded strange. But I am meeting a cousin that I didn't even know lived here and I am so excited!" She was not yet able to clearly identify the new feeling of the joy of the Lord.

At that moment Heather walked in, saw Julianna, and also saw Pappas and Asnat. They all knew each other and Heather immediately put on her best smile. She hugged her cousin and then stepped back and said, "Mr. Pappas, it is a small town in which we live and I suppose the smartest know where the best coffee can be found," and laughed.

Julianna was confused. Wait. How do these people know my cousin?

Pappas also acted overly happy to see Heather and extended his hand to Julianna. “I am Jim Pappas and your cousin and I both work for state government” and offered to purchase their morning beverage. Heather deliberately ignored Pappas and Asnat then, since clearly a wonderful reunion was happening. They graciously excused themselves to their own table on the far side of the dining room.

Internally of course, Jim’s alarm bells were going off. He was vaguely aware of Ms. Marcos’ importance within the governor’s office and of course, of the pending arrival of the famous pieces of art to visit New Mexico. He also got the feeling that something was up with her in the minds of his friends Bob Cohen and Avon Duvall but he didn’t know what.

As Heather and Julianna departed, she noticed that Pappas and Asnat were reading together out of two little books. She had no idea what they were but she felt a surge of disgust.

* * * * *

In this chance encounter, Heather reflexively thought something was amiss in meeting Pappas and Asnat like that. But the coffee shop was a popular place and she decided it was coincidental. She would report the sighting to Julio, who would be glad to hear it. More unusual to her though, was the sudden appearance in her life of her cousin Julianna. As she heard her story she was conflicted with feelings of love, almost sympathy but also of revulsion. Not for any religious reasons of course, but that such a vocation was so beneath her, she thought. “How could my lovely *prima* lower herself?” she asked herself. “When this week is over, I must do something to rescue her.”

* * * * *

Pappas called Cohen, and Marcos called Sergio. Blissfully in the dark about all that was going to go down, were Julianna and Karen. Karen didn’t even realize that two incalculably valuable art pieces were going to visit their city soon, and Julianna could not have cared less. But the pieces for a major event were coming together quickly. Upon arrival of the Monet and Van Gogh duo would be a wonderful celebration, emceed by the governor herself and nearly every media personality in the city. Secretly watching the participants and expecting something dangerous to occur was the team of eleven officials with Bob Cohen as bait. Also mobilizing were the assets of Sergio’s conspiracy. The Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt



Organizations (RICO) Act could not be more appropriately entitled for the very mischief that Sergio and Julio were planning.

* * * * *

No buildings had disappeared for congregations that were theologically liberal, and there were four theologically conservative Protestant congregations who had not lost their buildings. The leaders of those congregations, while curious about the phenomena, were not overly interested in supporting the Hit-G churches.

The conservative church buildings that had remained intact were the Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Faith Baptist Church (Independent), The Mercy Baptist Tabernacle, and Peace Lutheran Church of the Missouri Synod. All of these were stridently conservative in their theology.

Grace OPC had been without a pastor for two years, searching hard for candidates but weary and running out of leads. The Grace OPC building was originally a Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Hall, which the Grace OPC people had purchased.

Faith Baptist Church was primarily one large, connected family with a few non-related members. They had just completed a modest but beautiful new building and taken occupancy a month before Hit-G had struck. Their head deacon was an architect and had designed the facility. Their little facility sat on its small lot quietly, proudly.

The Mercy Baptist Tabernacle was an African American congregation, housed in the former Bijou Theater in the middle of town. MBT was also without a pastor and their ninety-six-year-old founding deacon had recently died. They were a humble, faithful body of believers, doggedly pressing on and trusting God.

The people of Peace Lutheran Church were a warm little congregation and their small facility was built in a post-modern style, as if Frank Lloyd Wright had designed it. Their pastor is Holgen Torstein, originally from northern Wisconsin and about as old-world Lutheran as they come.

Frank Moniz sat over his morning coffee, pondering the question as to why these church bodies had not lost their buildings. Like the Hit-G congregations they were theologically conservative, biblically driven and each were well known in the city for their social outreaches. These outreaches were humble and not game-changing

endeavors but each had a sincere and passionate motive to be more than just talkers with their faith. Grace OPC ran a clothes closet for poor people. Faith Baptist Church sponsored Afghan refugees. Mercy Baptist, out of their former theater, offered a Friday night soup and sandwich outreach primarily to the downtown Native Americans. Peace Lutheran was known for their small, but effective drug counseling and anti-trafficking work. None of these churches, Moniz reflected, were easy to communicate with—especially the two with no current pastor. He also had not noticed any media attention questioning why their buildings were exempt. He also wondered, as did others, why the theologically liberal congregations had also kept their facilities? He rubbed his temples. He had a headache.

82

In this event, Sergio would be the shooter and Julio the actor. Julio seamlessly joined the three-van art caravan at the departure warehouse facility in Mexico City. He acted his part as an enthusiastic curator and art fanatic on the trip up to the border. Heather would already be on the scene with the governor's entourage, awaiting arrival of the masterpieces.

Once the caravan arrived at the capitol in Santa Fe, Sergio would use a Cheyenne Tactical M-200 Intervention sniper rifle with a .408 CheyTac round. He only intended to use two rounds.

He would then leave the M-200 at the shoot-site about a half-mile away, wiped clean of any prints. He intended to be elsewhere by the time it was found.

* * * * *

As the three transport vans crossed the US border at the Acuña-Del Rio International Bridge over the Rio Grande Rover, a Sikorsky MH60-T Black Hawk helicopter with a new Matrix autonomy system was on the scene. The Matrix system meant that the chopper had no on-board pilots. It hovered over the off-



ramp to the bridge, video equipped and remotely operated by two Air Guard pilots, one of whom was Lieutenant Bruce Philipsburg. Since this was not truly a tactical mission, it was thought that now would be a good time to live-trial the Matrix autonomous system in a real-time surveillance application.

In the lead van Julio noticed the chopper shadowing their caravan. This did not surprise him and it felt kind of flattering. What he did not know was that it was pilotless, nor did he know that an unmarked Toyota Highlander some distance behind carried the two airmen, one of whom was piloting the Jayhawk from his iPad. The other had direct experience with the *Demônios'* last attack—and the scar on his foot to prove it.

The Santa Fe VIPs were in touch with the caravan. No detail of security had been left undone. The governor was unaware of the extra arrangements planned by Bob Cohen, Trooper Avon Duvall, and others. She knew that elements of the Santa Fe SWAT team would be around, but that was nothing unusual when she appeared in public. She knew nothing of the role Taylor, Morrisette, or McConnell would play, and nothing of the trap being set for the *Demônios* incursion, should it occur. But her two aides were on board and if she needed to know anything more, they could immediately bring her up to speed. In fact, Carlos and Bill had been having a running debate among themselves about the propriety of bringing her into the plan anyway.

At eight o'clock that morning, two hours prior to the planned arrival, Cohen and many other journalists arrived in front of the capitol. Cohen had his usual Glock in a hidden holster, plus a small Beretta in an ankle holster. He also had pocketed three extra clips of ammunition. He didn't expect a war but did not want to be unprepared. The three SWAT riflemen were posted at dawn and the others carefully arrived at different times and remained out of sight. Trooper Duvall took a prominent place on the plaza. All were in touch via earbud radio connection and communication checks were unobtrusively carried out. Mindy McConnell was in a secure office in the Bataan building, connected to both state police and city police headquarters buildings, and her radio-checks were securely completed. She had not needed to justify her involvement; having national news media credentials connected her to law enforcement for such a high-profile arrival.

Cohen suspected that if there was an attack planned it would involve a significant force from *Demônios Elevados.* He did not think they would deploy in a subtle way.

In this assumption he was wrong. It was Sergio, Julio, and Heather, plus two unnamed masked operatives who were in and out of town very quickly. Their collective wisdom was, *Let's put a serious hurt on them, make our statement and take out our two targets.* The less gang soldiers involved, the fewer had to be shielded. After Christmas Eve, they had learned a few lessons.

Although the Jayhawk had been seen by Sergio/ Manuel López, he was unaware of its armament. This aircraft was an MH-60T Jayhawk version of the HH-60 Pace Hawk helicopter, generally outfitted for coastal patrol, interdiction, and rescue. It was painted in Coast Guard colors but its standard M240H machine gun, also remotely controllable by the two airmen in the Toyota, was not mounted visibly in the door, but in a variable geometry special pod underneath, not easily identifiable as a weapons mount. It was synced with the video system. This helicopter was ready for surveillance with its video capability and for interference with any trouble, should she be needed, with no risk of pilot injury.

* * * * *

Julianna was not working on this lovely morning and decided to treat herself to a nice café breakfast near the capitol. She thought it would be rejuvenating to cruise the art exhibits afterward. She was feeling so wonderfully strange now. She had felt a difference in her spirit, a freedom and sense of redemption although she had not abandoned her clientele. However, she had been spending time with Sally. Her cousin Maria, on the other hand, was too busy with her important government job. She knew that today would see the arrival of a wonderful surprise for the capitol. Maybe she might catch a glimpse of Maria at the arrival ceremony. She was so proud of her cousin.

* * * * *

The caravan of three vans made its way north on the Old Pecos Trail Road into town. Once inside the city limits, two city police cruisers joined, one at the front and one at the rear. The Jayhawk followed at about a thousand feet altitude, and the airmen about a quarter mile behind. They took a left on East Alameda Street, then another left on Don Gaspar Avenue, which would take them to the semi-circular entrance to the front of the capitol. There were no tall buildings in Santa Fe. The Bataan Memorial Building, across the street from the state capitol complex,



was only a two-story building. The capitol itself was only three floors above ground. But the Bataan building had a forty-five-foot tower at the rear.

Last night, two very clever *Demônios* soldiers climbed this tower. They carried with them a remotely operated sniper rifle mounted on a Precision Remotes Telepresent Rapid-Aiming Platform or TRAP, which is basically a computer-operated weapon platform. The mounted and loaded weapon was a Barrett M82A1 sniper rifle. If an observer looked carefully up to the open part of the tower on this crisp and sunny morning, one might discern a small piece of equipment at the bottom of the opening. No one noticed it though, even the carefully placed SWAT members. They were placed on roof tops of other low buildings along Don Gaspar Avenue and South Capitol Street.

Sergio had spent the night lying prone, in the cooling tower facility north of the main entrance of the capitol. He had carefully carved out a small portal of the stucco and, being so close, he would not need a complicated scope system. As he planned it, the Barrett would provide the initial distraction. Sergio would control its function from his cell phone, and with no silencer it would be deafening. With attention being diverted, Julio would simultaneously use his M-200.

That was the plan, anyway, and he planned to choose his moment carefully—not hastily and both Sergio and Heather knew this. Heather would play the part of the noble gubernatorial assistant and act like she was trying to protect the governor. The signal would be an inaudible flash-message to their cell phones at two minutes to go. Amazingly, Julio was quite relaxed. Arrogance has a few psychological advantages.

83

The three vans and two city police cruisers rounded the semi-circular drive at the front of the capitol. It was a beautiful day, as forecasted. They came to a halt with the second van in front of the center walkway. It had a rise of two ramps and about ten steps up. Stucco planters and trees accentuated the plaza, and the pole that once was adorned with a large, hanging sculpture was bare and blackened.

Other city police officers were positioned as the drive was roped off from pedestrians and vehicles. Media people were around with video and still cameras and of course, cell phones. Sightseers and art community members, plus some academics too, were milling about awaiting a glance at the crates of the iconic Impressionism pieces. Bill and Carlos stood on opposite sides and about ten feet out from the main doors of the capitol.

Bob Cohen, wearing an oversized camouflage shirt was among the media "scourge," as Trooper Duvall liked to call them. He wore a similar camo baseball cap that said "Santa Fe Day" on the front. Mindy McConnell had added a special patch on the back which read, "Tomorrow's News Today" which was sarcastic but made her laugh loudly when she presented it to Cohen. He responded, "better than last week's news next week." He happily allowed her to attach it to the back of his cap. They both noted the irony in wearing anything camouflaged when he was intent on being seen and serving as bait to draw out the *Demônios.*

As the vehicles came to a stop, their drivers got out and opened the van doors. Cohen worked his way to the front of the media entourage. The front doors to the capitol opened and Governor Grimley, flanked by a handful of aides, which included Heather Marcos, came out and smiled and waved to everyone. Bill and Carlos were watching everywhere with eagle eyes. Heather saw them, but knew they were just doing their jobs. In fact, it would have spooked her if they had not been there.

A hovering helicopter would normally make a loud and distracting noise, especially if nearby but the Jayhawk was equipped with a special muffling apparatus that lessened its sound by nearly fifty percent. It was stationary, at about five hundred feet and perhaps two hundred yards west of the scene. Everyone heard it but no one paid much attention. Cohen said loudly, obnoxiously, "I bet that stupid chopper is on CNN retainer and getting some sweet footage." The two airmen, in civilian



clothes, were sitting nonchalantly on a park bench across the street. One was looking at an iPad.

The governor and her group slowly walked out to the vans where the crates were being off-loaded on to carts to be wheeled into the capitol. There was a lectern with the seal of the State of New Mexico and a microphone affixed to it. Obviously, the masterpieces were not visible. There were two large crates which contained the Monet and the Van Gogh.

But there followed three other crates. These had marked on them MOUNTING HARDWARE AND SECURITY. These were off-loaded from the van that had "Department of Historic Preservation" written on the roof. Cohen took all of this in, spoke quietly but distinctly to McConnell and Duvall who were networked together. "Three crates coming out of the lead van, the one with DHP on the roof," he said.

"Jezebel," which was their codename for Heather Marcos, "is watching the crates carefully, staying next to Number One," their codename for the governor.

Cohen flitted about, not getting too close to the principals, and not standing in one place long. So were most of the other journalists. As the governor approached the lectern to speak, she would be joined by Julio. He had adroitly convinced the officials on the trip that he would be happy to be the official emissary of the art world for the brief press event, endorsed as he was with so many sterling credentials.

And then out of the crowd, Julianna wandered, hoping to get closer to see her cousin. She was standing about eight feet from the lectern but right in front of it. Heather saw her, was surprised, and then felt a wave of guilt. All the interior fortitude for her cause evaporated. She was looking right at Julianna, caught her eye and saw the younger woman beam a look of happiness. She forced a smile at Julianna but stayed by the governor.

Sergio was aimed. Julio was standing near the governor for the photo op, smiling, when he glanced down at his phone. At a moment when all eyes seemed to be on the governor, he flashed the two-minute alert, and Heather felt the vibration in her phone, and deftly stepped back from the governor's entourage.

Governor Grimley reached towards the microphone and began to speak. The crowd quieted somewhat and listened.

“Greetings and welcome New Mexicans, art lovers and all who appreciate the great classics. Today we begin a wonderful month of displaying two renown Impressionist paintings which will be placed on display beginning tomorrow. I can’t wait to see them and to gaze on the brilliance of Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh. It is a great privilege to have them visit us and . . .”

At that moment, a loud crack was heard from nearby and a bullet burst into the glass doors behind the governor, followed by another crack and a second bullet which struck the lectern and ricocheted upward and into the stucco frontispiece above the doors. These were the Barrett M82A1 rounds, from the Bataan tower. All eyes looked in terror towards that direction.

Almost simultaneously, another round struck the governor in the left arm and went through it. She fell backwards and several people screamed. It was a lightning speed chess board of movement then. Bill threw himself in front of the governor and Carlos let her fall back into his grasp. Heather came forward, to be seen clearly, and looked all around as if she had no idea where that shot came from. Cohen stepped in front too, making himself plain. The next bullet then struck him in the chest. He fell back and almost somersaulted over himself.

In these ninety seconds or so, Philipsburg and his fellow airmen watched the scene unfold from the video camera on the Jayhawk. They scanned the area quickly and immediately spotted Sergio in the cooling tower, though no one else could see him. The chopper was motioned over it and the M240H machine gun let out a roar and riddled the tower. Sergio was dead instantly.

*Screegion was howling with delight as were its minions, hovering around the chopper and cursing it in a form of demon jubilance. That is, until Kuriosagapa appeared to them and again, half-drew his weapon from its scabbard. No other angels appeared or were needed. The single angel was sufficient—he knew that Philipsburg was engaged in the skirmish, although not in the Jayhawk. As they were accustomed, the demons screeched and green-poofed—which in the spirit world emitted a sound like a puff ball in the woods. But not before Kuriosagapa uttered something calm in an unknown dialect which pierced a hole through Screegion, and the demon gang was dispersed. The angel then moved towards the bench where the airmen sat. He did not appear to them; it was not his providence to do so today.*



Heather was stunned at the occurrence. She looked for Julio, who was at the back of one of the crates. It had a special panel which he was able to open. He pulled out a FIM-92 Stinger surface to air missile. Its battery was charged. He shouldered it and aimed it at the chopper. The thirty-four-pound weapon was solidly planted on his shoulder as he squeezed the fire mechanism. The missile fired out and struck the chopper in the tail assembly and exploded. The chopper autorotated to starboard, the two airmen on the bench on the iPad were trying to steer the aircraft away from the crowd. It crashed in a huge explosion in the parking lot of the state engineer’s office.

Heather did not know either of the presence of the hidden weapon in the crate, nor of Julio’s impulsive violence. She was stunned but quickly thought of what to do. She ran towards him and tackled him. State police officers also rushed forward. But before they got to the two, another shot rang out and a round struck Julio in the chest. A SWAT sniper had seen him and with a green standing order, took him down. Blood gushed out and covered his chest, and Heather as well.

Cohen was down, and with the governor struck, it took another ninety seconds or so for anyone to come to his aid, and that happened to be State Trooper Avon Duvall. Cohen was unconscious, but not bleeding. It was then that Duvall patted around and felt something hard under Cohen’s camo shirt. Duvall’s eyebrow went up. He lifted the hem of the shirt and there was a full Kevlar vest. He patted Cohen’s face to try to revive him. Even so, being struck by a rifle round was no mere football hit. It was more like being hit by a car. Cohen didn’t respond at first. Duvall slapped him a little harder and tried to hoist him up. Cohen’s eyes opened and he violently vomited—one camo shirt soiled. He looked right at Duvall’s face but didn’t seem to recognize him at first. When he did, he croaked out, “Shit, officer, we’re going to have to quit meeting like this. Oh man does that hurt! Did I catch a round?”

“You did, Bob, and so did the chopper,” as he pointed to the smoke rising from the parking lot across the street.

Duvall could see the round embedded in the Kevlar. He dug it out, examined it, and handed it to Cohen. “That’s a forty caliber CheyTac round, officer,” Cohen croaked again. “My vest was fifty-fifty for that,” he said, almost giddy.

“Let’s get an EMT to look at you.” The state trooper spoke into his radio, requesting an ambulance. Three were already on the way. The governor was shot, and perps

were down too. No one yet knew if there were any civilian injuries and most of the crowd, except for the most stalwart journalists, had scattered.

Julianna had rushed forward, and was clutching Heather, who was clutching Julio. The younger woman sensed that she needed to get Heather away from that body. The Stinger launcher lay on the ground, a wisp of vapor seeping out of it. Cops were everywhere, expecting some kind of major assault. The two airmen were also standing over Cohen and Lieutenant Philipsburg said to him, “United States Air Force, at your service, citizen.” The lieutenant sat down on the ground next to Cohen.

“What did your Blackhawk do, gentlemen?” asked Cohen, who was finding it hard to speak.

“Bob, it has been retired, I am afraid,” pointing to the smoke pall and fire which was now being attended by the first of the arriving fire apparatus. “And it’s not a Blackhawk, it is—or was—a Jayhawk. That’s now two choppers the government’s gonna hold me accountable for.” At this both men chuffed.

“What happened, Lieutenant?” he asked finally.

Philipsburg explained, “In brief, Bob, there were a couple of rifle shots, which struck no one—evidently a decoy. The SWAT boys found a Barrett sniper rifle in that tower,” and he pointed to the back of the Bataan building. “It was in a TRAP configuration, which means . . .”

“Yeah, I know what TRAP means. Ingenious.”

The lieutenant went on. “We angled the chopper around and the camera spotted a prone shooter in the cooling tower, and then the chopper’s gun . . .,” he looked at the other airman who grinned and said, “Rat-a-tat-tat.”

Cohen was sitting up now as all kinds of cops, rescue squad personnel, news people, and others rushed around. State officers, and Carlos—the governor’s aide—were huddled around the bogus art emissary, who was very dead. Heather Marcos was crying, but trying to act as though she was upset about the governor’s being shot. Julianna was trying to comfort her.



Cohen said to Duvall, “Why did this happen? Why go to all this trouble to assassinate the governor and take me out too?”

“You know the answer to that, Bob,” said the trooper.

“Yeah. But a Stinger, you say? Man . . .”

“How is the governor?” he then thought to inquire.

Duvall’s face went dark. “They say she took a round through her left arm. She’s on her way to the ER.” He thought for a moment. “It wasn’t fatal. And you’re not dead. Seems like our friends failed in their mission. Plus, the paintings are safely inside and under heavy guard. But this was no heist. This was an assassination mission.”

Carlos was curious as to why Heather was so distraught over the art emissary/ shooter? And who is this other young woman hanging on to Ms. Marcos? His partner, Bill, was with the governor at the emergency room, providing close protection in case there would be any follow-up attempts on her life. There would not be.

At that point, two SWAT men walked up to Duvall and Cohen with a mangled sniper rifle, that they had confiscated as evidence from the riddled cooling tower. Sergio was being body-bagged and transported to the FBI facility first and then would be taken to the morgue. Cohen took one glance at the rifle and said, “That’s a $12,000 Cheyenne Intervention rifle. Or was.”

* * * * *

Santa Fe, New Mexico had been known as a premier location for retirement, lovely climate, art museums, lots of nice restaurants, etc. Now it was becoming known as one of the most dramatic places in the country. Hit-G, a terrible attack on a Christmas Eve service, now an assassination attempt on the governor during what should have been a very happy occasion.

Lucy Grimley lay in her hospital bed, daughter Maegan at her side. Her arm had been surgically repaired and casted. The pain medication was nice but she was depressed and wondered how all this could happen?

Carlos had joined ever-vigilant Bill outside the room, and they were both exhausted. He learned that she was awake and he walked in quietly. Maegan looked up and smiled and said to him, “She’s going to be okay.”

Carlos looked hard at her and sat down in a chair by the door. The governor looked over at him and said, “Hello Carlos, how are you?”

Carlos got tears in his eyes, wiped them and almost could not speak. He felt so guilty and responsible that she had been attacked again. He should have prevented it somehow. “Madam Governor, I apologize . . .” he said but couldn’t get any other words out.

“Carlos,” she said, “Relax. We thought the gang would attack again. You and Bill did your jobs. It was a sniper, carefully prepared, I am told by state police. We will be even more cautious from here on out,” and she winced as she moved her arm.

“Ma’am,” he started, “The two men killed were both local *Demônios* operatives. They are dealt with. But there are more of them. And they are not known for forgiveness. I will get to the bottom of things.”

The governor smiled. “I am sure you will, Carlos, and thank you for coming in.” Then she dozed off.

Maegan walked out with him.

* * * * *

Cohen had a visit to the ER, a chest X-ray—which revealed severe bruising but no broken bones. His chest hurt a lot but it was nothing he could not live with. McConnell went in, looked at him in his ER cubicle and sat down. She started weeping.

“C’mon Commando Lady, it’s not that bad,” he said and tried to smile at her.

She said nothing at first. Then she said, “I don’t know. They were aiming at you, you bastard! And they had good aim. They’re not going to stop until they kill you. Oh wait, I’m sorry—there’s another word . . . liquidate. That’s what they call it, isn’t it? Nice and tidy word.”



“God bless Kevlar,” he said quietly.

Mindy got out of her chair, crept to his side, got down on her knees, held his hands and cried. “I . . . I should have been there with you, you stupid jerk.”

“I didn’t want you exposed,” he said quietly.

Just then Avon Duvall stuck his head through the curtain and inquired, “Geez you two, get a room,” and chuckled. “Can I talk to you both?”

“Yeah sure, good to see you, Officer. Thanks for stopping by,” Cohen said—again flatly. He was still in shock and Duvall understood this. McConnell, however, did not know what was going on in her head. These two were just colleagues, weren’t they?

The state trooper sat in a chair. “The two shooters were *Demônios* mid-level soldiers. The governor clearly was the main course, and you, Mr. Cohen, were the dessert. They were very clever. They had a TRAP set up in the Bataan tower. That was a distraction. Apparently, it didn’t matter what its bullets would hit. The shooter in the cooling tower, that was Sergio Sánchez. We think he was the driver at the first attack on the sculpture. Since an RPG was used by the guy in the back of the van, and one was fished out of the art crate today, we assume the second perp was Julio Hernandez but his credentials were very impressive. He was masquerading as one Manuel G. López, art curator. As I say, a very impressive charade. The one very sad casualty today was the chopper. We were fortunate that the Air Force boys were able to crash-land it away from the crowds.”

“Only just barely, right?” Cohen commented.

“Right,” Duvall said. “It was—how do the religious people say—providential—that an open space in the engineer’s parking lot, was available. It did a new paint job on a Volkswagen Jetta though,” which had been burned to a crisp. “I wonder if the owner’s insurance has a ‘flaming Black Hawk’ clause?”

“Please, Officer,” groaned Mindy.

“And Ms. McConnell, I am glad you were out of harm’s way today. Glad indeed,” Duvall added.

“Thank you, Avon, “I wish I had been here. I would have liked to . . .”

“I understand, Ma’am. I do. But it was better for you to be safe. Actually, I’m surprised no one else was injured.” Duvall continued, “The TRAP shots were high. Some plasterer will get a job to repair the capitol walls.”

“And Ms. Marcos?” Cohen asked.

Duvall frowned. “She seemed distraught at the scene, we’re not sure what for. The two aides are making sure she isn’t around the governor. She has not been arrested at this point.”

The pain meds were kicking in and Cohen dozed off again. Mindy pulled a chair over and sat close to him, taking his hand now and then.

“Ms. McConnell, thank you for helping us get to the bottom of this. I am glad you are both okay.” At that, Duvall exited the ER and drove off.

* * * * *

Heather Marcos was stunned and confused—almost apoplectic. Her loyalty to Julio was as to a father. Her affection for Sergio was as to a lover. Her devotion to the mission of the *Demônios Elevados* remained, but now she had begun to fear that her cover was blown. She drove to the safe house and took Julianna with her. She was glad to not be alone. Her excuse for not visiting the governor was that she was traumatized and exhausted. This had been a Saturday and not a workday anyway. Besides, no one would expect a network administrator to have any connection to the arrival of art pieces, their unpacking, or security. That work went on despite the attack. It appeared that the attack was not larcenous but political. The two crates were moved into the capitol by city police and secured. When things were cleaned up outside, the art staff was allowed to begin the careful job of unpacking and erecting their display.

The third crate indeed held the mounting gear but with the discovery of the small door and its hidden Stinger, the FBI took control of that matériel, once the mounting racks were removed. What they found was another hidden compartment which contained packets of over-the-counter medications. The FBI were not put off by this, and detective Taylor joined in the investigation.



Several cartons of items like Tylenol, ibuprofen, cough drops and the like—very mundane—were laid out on a table in a capitol conference room, photographed, labeled and an officer posted until crime lab personnel could arrive. When the governor was informed of this, she asked that Jim Pappas be brought into the investigation. She remembered that he had a chemistry background. Pappas was called and drove to the capitol straightway from his home.

Pappas of course, was not in law enforcement but he had gained the confidence of the governor and was aware that there might be a *Demônios* plant on her staff, although the governor had not yet been made aware. That was about to change.

*Screegion was lurking about, alone, muttering demon-cruses to itself. It also was giggling a weird chortle—two souls had been won. The demon knew that an angel was near, and it said to itself, “that creepy one with the cursed saber.” It kept watching over its shoulder.*

Pappas, Detective Taylor, and two FBI agents carefully pulled open the medication packages. None were of liquid form. Each capsule was painstakingly opened and explored. Sure enough, the insides contained something other than the labeled products.

Taylor said, “I think we have fentanyl. The lab will confirm that quickly.”

“If you’re right, detective,” said one of the agents, “this was quite a haul. Capturing this amount will smart to the sellers.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Taylor.

Pappas asked, “I don’t know why the governor wanted me here.”

The FBI agent shrugged. “Nice to have friends in high places, eh?” he said.

* * * * *

Maegan Grimley was acting stranger with each passing day. Or so her mom thought. When Maegan was over for lunch, she asked her, “Honey, you worry me. Are you becoming a Pentecostal or something?”

Maegan laughed at that one. “Ha! Mom, no, I don’t think so. But I have been feeling so off-kilter. Come with me. I want to show you something.” The governor followed her daughter out to her Honda Pilot. She opened the rear hatch and there were a bunch of architectural tubes, the kind in which drawings are stored.

“Okay,” said Lucy. “What are these?”

“I’m done, Mom,” Maegan said, smiling broadly. “I have completed—let’s call it just for kicks—nineteen complete designs for eighteen churches and one synagogue.”

“Only one synagogue?” the governor queried, with a raised eyebrow. “Two synagogues lost their buildings.”

“Right,” said Maegan. “I know. But for some reason I felt the two bodies could merge and become one, so I did a design for a new, merged congregation.”

Lucy stepped back, rubbed her chin. “Hmm. Perhaps that is not yours to decide. Maybe they would not want to merge.”

“I know, Mom, I know. And don’t think this strange idea hasn’t kept me awake at night. But that’s how the cookie crumbled. That’s what I felt led to do.” She pulled out the synagogue tube, carefully unrolled one of the drawings. “Look,” she said. The governor carefully held the vellum and studied it. It was the floor plan in one global view. It was magnificent. She knew enough about design to see that.

“Those two congregations, if merged, well this would be more than sufficient, darling. I see what you’re thinking. It is beautiful, and all I’m looking at is the overall layout. This is really something. I assume each of these is complete. What are you going to do with them?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet. Of course, I’ll offer the one, first, to Pastor Charlie—for our church. He was with me when I first saw that amazing drawing.” She had forgotten that she had not told her mother about The Drawing.

The governor said, “What amazing drawing?”

“Oh, I found a drawing of a facility a while ago that really inspired me, got me thinking, you know? That’s all.” And she let it go at that.



“So is your arm going to be okay, Mom?” Maegan turned the conversation back to more recent dramas.

They were still standing by Maegan’s Pilot. Lucy leaned back against the bumper and rubbed her sling immobilized left arm. “No, I don’t know, darling. My arm hurts like . . . hurts like the devil. They say that since the bone was only grazed that it will heal eventually. The meat of my arm is what really hurts. It’s hard to sleep. But more than this, I am angry and scared. I am a target. This gang wants to do me in. And I can’t be more protected.” She motioned down the street where Bill was sitting in his vehicle. “These guys are the best. But the gang is smart and if they want to get me, they will, eventually. Let’s go back inside.”

“Yeah Mom, of course,” and Maegan reflexively scanned around, trying not to look obvious.

Maegan Grimley presented her design to Pastor Charlie and his wife, Guinevere, at breakfast a week later. The pastor and wife were shocked with the beauty and keen insights into design and functionality, which showed upgrades to the previous design that Maegan had provided. The pastor said, “Maegan, this is amazing, but how could we afford this? I don’t even know how two or three merged congregations would afford such a lovely new facility.”

“Yes, pastor,” she said. “I don’t know. I drew and designed it as it came to me. Certainly not how they taught us in college!” and she laughed. “But for whatever it’s, it is my gift to our church. It was a delight to do. If nothing else, it will make good wall art some day!”

* * * * *

Karen Asnat and Jim Pappas were having a nice dinner at Karen’s apartment. They had talked about the recent capitol assault, and the governor’s inclusion of Pappas into the narcotics investigation. They talked about their families, Cohen and McConnell, and even what old episode of *Star Trek* they might watch tonight.

They were sharing two glasses of after-dinner wine, when Karen abruptly said, “The mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust.” She moved in her chair. “I have not forgotten about that.”

“I would not expect that you might,” he said.

“Jim, what did it mean? It’s got to mean something. We saw an angel. He talked to us. And then you saw him in a dream, and . . . well, I don’t know. We all seem to be caught up in something important. And we’re not in New York or London or someplace significant. We’re in flippin’ Santa Fe, New Mexico where our big night out is to go to a restaurant or something. Then I get this message from an angel and I don’t have a clue what it means.”

Pappas said nothing, pondering the cryptic lyric again. “The mystery unfolds,” he started. “What mystery? The Hit-G thing? I mean, that is one Class A, industrial-strength mystery. Or is it something else?”



He got up and went over to her desk, grabbed a pen and a piece of notepaper. He sat down next to her on the couch and wrote out the lyric. “It’s got six parts, Karen. Let’s pull it apart.”

“The mystery. Second, the verb ‘unfolds.’ This is angel-talk. I didn’t get a letter like this, but I was visited by the same guy, I mean, angel, who confirmed to you that this thing is real. Third, ‘light’ is the driver. Four, ‘but’ which is a logical contrast marker. You know ‘this, but this.’”

Karen smiled. “You would make a good editor, my friend,” she said.

“Exults,” Pappas continued. “Exults,” he said again. “That’s five things. What is that word? And what ‘exults’? The mystery? How does a mystery ‘exult,’ whatever that means?”

Karen poked at her phone. “Exult,” she read, “To feel or show triumphant elation or jubilation.”

“How the heck does a mystery show triumphant elation?” and he laughed.

“And six: with trust. Whatever exults, does so with trust,” he went on. She was listening.

He stood back up, walked around. “You get a letter, Karen, out of the blue. It’s from another world, I mean, holy Moses! There is some mystery, and it unfolds—I’m going to guess that means ‘gets explained’ or something, with light. What light? Real light? Nah. Philosophical light? Whatever that is, and that same mystery, ‘in contrast,’”—he put on an overly dramatic voice— “gets all happy by trusting in it. What’s the mystery this angel wanted to let you in on?”

“My, Jim, with all that’s happening with the gang attacks, everyone seems to have forgotten the biggest mystery ever to happen in Santa Fe. Twenty buildings disappearing all at once, no warning, no explanation, no evidence left behind—except the strange honey smell. And then one of them swallows a van or whatever it was. This has got to be the mystery. I don’t think the inhabitants of heaven are playing a game or a joke on me.”

“Good insight,” Jim remarked. “Good insight, really. I think you’re right. There’s a message and meaning. And we are intended, or you are, to figure this out. But from

what we've read in the Bible mysteries happened often. Things got revealed. I'm thinking of when we read Daniel, that was strange even for Daniel's time. But God showed stuff, when He wanted, to whom He wanted. And He didn't ask permission first, right? Ol' Daniel was freaked out for like, oh, his whole life."

She moved towards him. Then she said, "You know fella, I've got a revelation for you. I think I love you. I think I've fallen in love with you, Mr. Historic Preservation," and she looked at the floor, kind of afraid that he might not reciprocate.

He looked at her, stood up, sat down, stood up again. Yes, he was taken off guard with that. Here they were talking about a letter, an angel, a dream, hidden meanings. He sat down, right next to her. Her couch wasn't big. She almost fell off. And he took her face in his hands. He said, "You love me? Actually? Well, here's a thing that has gone from mystery to fact—I love you. I mean, too. I love you."

He went over to the door of the apartment, opened it, and yelled outside, "Hey everybody, I love this woman!" She got up and closed the door. She hugged him, looked into his eyes, and kissed him. A long one. He kissed her back like he had never kissed anyone. Joy flowed between them.

Then he said, "Karen, I don't know where our world is going. But I need to ask, do you think you might be interested in marrying me?" Then he backed off. "No, I didn't just ask you that. I'm sorry that was impulsive. Forgive me."

"Yes," she said.

"Well, that sentence doesn't require any editing." He got teary, "You will?"

"I will," she said, and gave him the most gorgeous smile he had ever seen. He grabbed her and hugged her so tightly and kissed her again. She had never felt happier.

*Kuriosagapa, off-duty with the lieutenant, was there. Right in the room. Saw, heard, and felt the whole thing. He smiled and said, "Praise and honor be to You, Master. Lord Jesus, how Your plan is marvelous with these fabulous creatures. I honor You for Your workings. They will exult with trust as this mystery unfolds in Your light. I am excited to see such a thing! Thank You for the privilege You extend me to serve You."*



* * * * *

The next morning, Karen texted Mindy McConnell.

Mindy replied: **What's up?**

Karen said: **News**

She texted back: **Can you and Bob meet us at Amaya, in Hotel Santa Fe at 7?**

Mindy replied**: Let me check with Bob, and I'll get back ASAP**

Ten minutes later, it was a double date. Bob would pick up Mindy at six thirty.

They arrived, were seated, and studied the menu, as if nothing was afoot. No need to order the roof off this time. Modest orders were given, a Picuris salad, a club sandwich, and an order of green chili chicken enchiladas. Bob ordered a nice bottle of white wine and they all relaxed, except Bob, as usual, watched the door.

"Geez, Louise," said Mindy, "Relax. Didn't you see the sign when we came in? NO BANDITOS ALLOWED."

Cohen beat his chest, and fake-coughed. His bruise still smarted but he was recovered. "Roger that, Madam," he said and smiled.

Jim took Karen's hand, looked at Cohen and McConnell and said, "Last night Karen told me she loves me. She beat me to it. Then I told her the same. Then I blurted out a marriage proposal. Then she said 'Yes.'" He stopped there.

"Wait. What?" stammered Mindy. "You're what?"

"We're engaged," Karen said quietly. "Editor meets government official. Strange things happen. They fall in love." She looked at Pappas quickly.

He added, "More weird stuff happens, they get engaged and plan to spend the rest of their days together. I am the luckiest guy alive," and grinned.

Mindy got up and went around the table and hugged Karen hard. The rest of the evening they reviewed the chain of strange events, the unforeseen providences in their relationship and even the spiritual side of things, which, oddly, didn't make

either Cohen or McConnell uncomfortable. They gave their warm congratulations, informed Jim and Karen that they were expected to provide prominent roles in whatever ceremony might be forthcoming, and they parted for the evening.

As Bob drove Mindy home, they were very quiet. He walked her to her door, kissed her on the forehead and said, “I gotta say, they make me happy.” Mindy nodded.

“Yeah. Me too. I like being around those two. And you know what, Bob? I like being around you too.” She shivered, smiled at him, and stood there.

This former Navy SEAL, grizzled newshound, veteran bandit-fighter finally melted. She was motionless. He touched her chin. Moved his hand around her hair. Looked at it. Lightly stroked her ear. And spoke, “Woman, you have been the biggest surprise in my life. I am actually . . .” he struggled to find the word, “. . . proud of you. And . . . I think I’ve fallen in love with you too.” He looked down. SEALs were trained to never look down. But look down he did. He was terrified of those eyes.

She stared into his eyes. She spoke softly, like dripping honey, he later thought. “Bob, you love me? Because I have fallen for you, Mr. RV Glock Man.” He laughed. How could he not? This gutsy woman journalist had mowed him down. On the dark porch, he very gently took her face in his hands. He kissed her gently, carefully. She could taste the poblano chili on his breath but she kissed him back. Then they looked at each other and kissed again. He did not think such a thing would ever happen to him. Too crusty. Too cynical. Too wounded. But now it had. He did not have the words. But out of some deep, forgotten vault in his soul, came the powerful feeling, *l$^{e}$Hallel a$^{h}$d Yhwh*, Praise to Jehovah.

Then, with all the courage he could muster he said, “Would you like to become Mrs. Cohen some day?” Again, he didn’t look at her. She laughed, very delicately, “Or you could become Mr. McConnell?” Then he did something which surprised them both. He picked her up and whirled her around with a ferocious energy. She squealed, and he put her down and said, “I’ll bring over some beers tomorrow night.” She laughed and said, “You’re on, Santa Fe Day Man.”

85

Rosaria Moniz and Sophia Menendez were sharing tea with each other on a Monday afternoon. They did this frequently since their husbands were often together playing golf or working through their post-Lord’s Day exhaustion. Sophia’s



shoulder wound from Christmas Eve was healing well after surgery, and she was almost back to normal. Still, the past few months had shaken both of these pastor’s wives.

The *Demônios’* continued insurgency and attacks in Santa Fe had energized the Cavern Fellowship security patrols even more. None of the assemblies had been attacked. With the deaths of two key members of the gang, things were quieter now. Nevertheless, vigilance these days was obvious between the churches. The two priests were always asking for updates and offering any help they could. Pastor Steve was always being guarded by somebody.

Rosaria covered her eyes and spoke quietly to her friend, “I feel like we are at war. I know the drug gang isn’t targeting churches but there is a spiritual war going on for the soul of Santa Fe.”

Sophia thought about that and said, “Yes, my sister, I think you are right. And we have been mobilizing physical weapons and soldiers. But you know what Paul wrote, ‘we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.’”

Her friend had also memorized the passage long ago. She picked up the recitation: “‘Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.’”

Sophia rubbed her shoulder, smiled, and continued: “‘Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.’”

Rosaria said, “Get me started with the next verse.” Sophia said, “‘In all . . .”

Rosaria: “‘In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one . . .’”

Sophia: “‘And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God . . .’”

Rosaria: “Yes, ‘. . . praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.’”

Sophia said, “That is something we have not really done yet. We have been reacting to danger. We need to go on the offensive. We need to pray that this curse, the gang curse, would be defeated by GOD. They are given to evil. We also need to pray more intentionally about the loss of our buildings.”

The two women prayed together then, asking God for direction and guidance. They prayed for their husbands; they prayed for the beating back of evil in Santa Fe; for a great wave of new people to find Christ by faith—not through some human crusade but on their own; they prayed for the police, the governor, and her staff. Then they parted ways and began their week. They sensed a moment of strength, in the Lord.

* * * * *

Maegan Grimley was reading a book that she had found online. It was a Christian novel called *He Came to Stay*. She thought it was poorly written, trite, predictable, and wholly unsatisfying. The titular character was an architect in the early 1900s, in small-town Iowa, a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, who had found Christ in a church, and stayed in that little town for the rest of his life. He designed many of the public buildings there and three of its churches. End of story. Flat, boring, thought Maegan. But she finished the book. It got her thinking, *why does a Christian novel have to be so bad? We have good minds and creative abilities. We should be writing the best books around.*

* * * * *

Lucille Grimley was lounging—a rare thing—in her home, her arm still ached. She mused, “Why has all this happened to me? I was shot, dammit. I didn’t deserve that. And I could have been shot before—on Christmas Eve for goodness sakes! A drug gang seems hell-bent on ruining our city. Why? I only wanted to help our state and our city. I wanted to make education more obtainable. I wanted to deter drugs coming in. I wanted to preserve from corporate greed the beautiful landscape we all enjoy. I wanted to help the Native American community move forward. And now I get shot.” She wasn’t too keen on reaching out to God. She imagined that was for other people. She would get by, find happiness, carve her own niche. But now she



found herself in a place beyond confidence in herself. She reached for another pain pill.

* * * * *

State Trooper Avon Duvall was on routine patrol, driving around the city on a prescribed route. The route wasn’t rigid; he could deviate or creatively investigate if he felt the need. No crises today. No calls for emergency assistance. No cryptic text messages from his friends. So today he was inclined to drive by a few of the Hit-G sites. No reason. No visit from an angel. He just felt an urge to do so.

* * * * *

Julianna had chilled overnight with her cousin Maria at a nice home in north Santa Fe, then she rode with Maria back to the city. She really didn’t want to work anymore in the sex trade. It wasn’t that she hated the acts, she could take them or leave them. But inside her, something had changed. Her old life felt alien to her. *Isn’t that strange,* she thought. She wanted to talk about it with Maria, and although her cousin was cordial, she seemed distracted since the attack at the capitol. Her mind was elsewhere, and how could her cousin really understand? She was a successful, self-sufficient woman with all kinds of friends and, apparently, plenty of money. Look at this place she lived in—it was so nice. Julianna began to wonder how—and if—she could get out of her profession? She would talk to Sally, and maybe she could give her some good advice.

* * * * *

Maria a.k.a. Heather was in a serious funk. She didn’t know who to turn to or if her real identity had somehow been discovered by the *establecimiento del gobierno.* The deaths of Julio and Sergio devastated her. Although she had always been ruthless and clever, she had done her work in the context of men who were also ruthless and clever. Since she left Mexico, she had never been without that context. Working in the capitol was never a solo endeavor; she was always part of a team, snaking her way into places of importance, learning confidentialities, scheming internet protocols, even charming the governor herself.

Now at least she had her cousin to consider. But Julianna was a chore, with an intensity that Maria did not understand. When she looked at her beautiful cousin now, she was mystified. It was as if something new had taken over inside the girl.

Julianna seemed like she was in a dream world, no longer in the dark wickedness of sex trafficking and prostitution that got her into America. Maria despised all these things, but for Julianna, they were the pragmatic means of her survival in a world with no other support.

86

The United States of America was and is an experiment in the democratic blending of various cultures and ethnicities, industry and agriculture, small business entrepreneurialism, education, government, military, religious diversity and last but certainly not least, entertainment. As the Anglo-European population expanded west, a taste for wide open space, fresh air, relaxation, and relief from east coast frenzy, became sacred. With the exception of The Civil War years, the country had generally a happy and visualized collaboration of many families of differing convictions, united in their short history and ever willing to learn new things. New ethnicities from all over the globe were absorbed and mostly accepted. Old prejudices, while still in existence, were gradually being overcome. Equity and a fairly brokered sense of opportunity were constantly being explored, refined and offered.

But there have also been the occasional dark episodes, sinister and evil. For nearly three hundred years, the United States seems to have had a built-in corrective mechanism of grace. It had been switched on by such events as the War of 1812, Appomattox, the 1918 flu pandemic, the Depression, the Second World War, and the events of September 11, 2001. In those instances, its citizenry seemed to come to their senses, seek the Lord, gain a new bearing.

Deeper still there have occurred more highly focused evil forces of conspiracy. The Ku Klux Klan, the Mafia, the Watergate cover-up, and human-trafficking networks. Other such events, now occurring in Santa Fe, New Mexico, were the Hit-G event, the *Demônios* incursion, the IRS letters received by all the Hit-G churches, and the as yet unrevealed Screegion and the stinktroops.

Pastor Frank Moniz brooded about what he increasingly sensed was far more wicked than first thought. The disappearance of twenty buildings for twenty spiritual communities, viewed from a spiritual perspective, as Providence, had its residual benefits, but it was a great injury to each fellowship. The focused attacks, which seemed to be increasing in their sophistication, doubled his worry. He sensed



something more destructive was going on. He didn't know what exactly, but he and his friend Pastor Steve Menendez were more than open to their wives' idea that prayer about what was happening needed to become more focused, more directed, and more fervent.

* * * * *

Since at least the days of *Star Trek,* and probably much earlier*,* the idea of matter-transport had been imagined, and toyed with in some think tanks. It was even explored in a few university and Department of Defense laboratories, not only in the United States but in China, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In the nation of Brazil, with almost 100,000 students and an annual budget of $7.5 billion, the University of São Paulo is felt by some to be the premier institution of learning and research in South America. A closely protected research endeavor there involves matter transport. It was known that a tiny bit of matter had been successfully moved from one place on campus to another, multiple times as early as the 1970s. The piece of *queijo* was a one-half gram sample of a simple but stable protein. It was reduced by a beam of highly concentrated energy to essentially an electronic signal, and then reverse-materialized in a nearby location with a technically identical but mirrored apparatus.

What was not known by hardly anyone outside of the physics department and the highest level of administration, was the simultaneous creation of a much larger process, a super-transport mover, or *super transporte* in Portuguese. Called "T" by its engineers, it was the same technology but capable of a larger load for transport. The more exciting development in the last five years was its adaptation to a satellite platform. A focused beam of "T" energy could then be aimed at any single non-living object and super-transported away. Trials with a Brazilian Amazônia satellite, reputed to be an imaging platform, had succeeded in transporting a whole automobile into space.

The elegant aspect of this technology was that the "T" could target more than one object at a time using a truly ingenious technology called a split-focused beam array, affectionately referred to by its developers as Spt-Bam. A research wall was hit however when the attempt to re-materialize the auto back to its original earth coordinates only served to re-transport a molten blob of the same weight and basic chemical elements back. Disappointment was felt all around the USP-Physics team, but it was thought to be a wonderful challenge for future researchers.

This was all well and good, and a very positive development for the inner elite of the university. Its unveiling was to be a carefully choreographed event for some time in the coming two years. However, the trade/educational/field secret became known by a member of *Demônios Elevados.* It seems the ever-tantalizing prospect of an almost endless profit stream from the marketing of narcotics into the United States had seduced one of the principal scientists on the "T" project. His name was Professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD, from Caltech University. Professor Hernández lacked nothing in the realm of experimental and research physics. With the almost limitless funding source from the American illicit drug market, he envisioned leaping forward years with "T" development.

It was an old story. A seemingly noble and publicly respected scholar possesses a less than noble and secret side to his life. He was not alone. He was uncle to the late art aficionado Julio Hernandez and to his cousin, Sergio Sánchez. And although they knew nothing of their uncle's magnum opus physics achievement, they were happy to partner with him on anything he proposed. The transport of narcotics was his immediate goal. However, he did not tell them of the major and significant experiment he had concocted, with a small team from São Paulo. They also did not know of his intense—manic even—hatred for Christianity as a religion. This was rooted in his childhood when he was infected with rage by an evangelical mission agency, which was deemed almost cultist in their over-enthusiasm and cluelessness for boundaries. They bowled over anyone in their path—whole families—with their brand of quasi-evangelical faith.

For fifty years, Christian faith of an evangelical flavor had been sweeping through most of the South American continent. Even Pope Paul II had noticed and sent an investigative delegation to see what could be done to stem the evangelical tsunami. Professor João Manuel Hernández didn't really care that the Pope was investigating or not. He hated the faith in general. It was a sub-conscious source of motivation to go into the field of physics, and he intended to get rid of as many churches as he could in Santa Fe New Mexico, via the "T"/Amazônia platform. The point was to seriously cripple the force that had evolved into a powerful deterrent to the narcotics trade, which was the network of conservative, Bible-based churches in that city. It was almost poetic that these churches had no idea that their corporate influence had seriously hindered the potential drug trade.

Hernandez was aware of the deaths of several *Demônios* soldiers in recent months. He was aware of the failed delivery of a large shipment of disguised fentanyl and



the resultant deaths of his relatives. He was confident that the disappearance of so many houses of worship would provide a perfect distraction and impediment to what he and his *Demônios* partners saw as an annoying long-term hindrance of their commercial enterprise. And so, on that Saturday night, with no people expected in any of the buildings, the "T" Amazônia super-transported the measured facilities into high-synchronous orbit. They would float in space, their connected parts would slowly disassemble and succumb to various zero gravity forces, their orbits would decay, and they would burn up in earth's atmosphere. *¡Que pena!*

Unbeknownst to either of them, was a strange and invisible collaboration between Professor Hernández and Francis Xappa, an attorney in Ogden, Utah, who was a revenue officer of the Southwest Center for the Internal Revenue Service.

*A third conspirator was an exceedingly evil spiritual being, an Archas—a ruler of sorts, more potent with malicious power than a mere demon—whose sergeant servant was a demon named Screegion. This Archas had no name and no one in that realm knew how many of them existed. People who paid attention to the writings of the New Testament would have encountered the simple mention of this entity a couple of times, from the apostle Paul. When appearing, which was rare, it displayed none of the tasteless and puerile behavior of Screegion and his minions. It was communicated by dark thoughts and a terrifying clicking sensation, discernible only in the spiritual realm. Screegion did not relish their meetings.*

This unholy alliance was pinpoint focused on the City of Santa Fe, New Mexico. They had no discernible communication between them but mutually sensed the same passion to destroy the city's dignity, and a wider plan to spread the narcotic world out from that city. The Governor of New Mexico was another hated target. The alliance detected no connection between her administration and what was now the Cavern Fellowship. But their despicable poison spread to Governor Grimley, her people, the law enforcement assets, the churches, the synagogues, and anyone else whom they might regard as being friendly to the anti-drug cause—that is, someone who might get in their way. It was a total, blind, complete raging hatred for these pitiable humans.

Even so, these humans were not without resources, and powerful ones. The most dominant being, as Simon Peter called Him: The Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. These Santa Fe saints, like all saints through the centuries, were given a direct

line to the Shepherd, with open access at any time. A most amazing thing—if they would access it.

* * * * *

Two Cavern Fellowship prayer endeavors were started. One was led by the pastors themselves and a few senior leaders. They determined to meet to pray once a week.

The other was a lay effort that would meet once per week to pray, which was led by New Beginnings Christian Fellowship trustee, David D'Angelo. He connected with a few other churches and made a broad and open invitation to all members and attenders of the eighteen churches and two synagogues. To invite the synagogue members was controversial. Although it was known that they were Messianic congregations and their protocols and lingo were still Jewish, it was decided to invite them to participate. They all knew that this was their best weapon against whatever evil was amongst them. There was no theatre to it, they just committed to the hard work and were focused on reaching out to a sovereign, powerful and loving God, in His Son and through His Spirit. The theologically liberal and modernist Protestant congregations in the area were not interested, largely due to reactions patterned by their clergy.

* * * * *

*The noteworthy plan, bluntly entitled "death to the city" and spoken a single time to Screegion by the Archas, was to spiritually ruin the City of Santa Fe. It was not the most intense nor the most widespread of such efforts in history, but it was significant enough, with temporal prospects delectable enough to rally the chosen demonic squad. They were as excited and intent as demons can be. Generally, they did not directly attack believers in Christ. They were more furtive and desperately clever than that, always thinking and darkly hoping that somehow, they could outwit the saints, even with their abhorred angel overwatch. This battle had been raging with the same ancient purpose since time immemorial.*

87

At the governor's disposal was the New Mexico State Police Airbus H145 helicopter. On this day she requested that it meet her at the Santa Fe Regional Airport. It was flown in from Albuquerque for a quick overflight of her city. She had only flown



twice on the plane, one of the most advanced police aircraft in the nation. On this day she felt a nagging urgency to see again the twenty Hit-G holes, from the air. She invited Jim Pappas and Avon DuVall to accompany her as escorts. Pappas walked over to the capitol from the Bataan building and met the governor with her aides Bill and Carlos at the front entrance. Their vehicle was waiting and they would pick up Trooper Duvall at the state police facility at the Santa Fe airport.

None of her accompaniment knew the purpose of this flight. As far as they knew nothing new would be seen. The holes were as they had been, perhaps windswept but still cleanly cut and empty. The three of them with their pilot lifted off and carefully flew around the city but in no particular order. They were constricted of course by various air traffic particulars for that time of day. Her only specification to the pilot was to cover all twenty holes, and hover over each one for a couple of minutes. They all wore headsets, plugged into the chopper's intercom.

After cruising over and peering down into several Hit-Gs, Trooper Duvall asked, "Madam Governor, I am wondering what you are looking for today." The governor did not reply. She was intently looking down into the hole where Southwest Evangelical Free Church used to sit. This was the church that her daughter had originally designed and attended. Jim Pappas noted that she did not respond to Duvall's question. He looked at her, and she seemed closely focused on something. She grabbed a set of binoculars that was attached to the side post near the chopper's door, focused, and looked into the hole.

Pappas asked, "What are you looking at, Madam Governor?"

She thrust the binoculars at Trooper Duvall and said, "Look down there, Officer."

Duvall looked through the binoculars into the hole. "What the . . .," he said.

“Gimme,” said Pappas and Duvall handed him the binoculars. “Whoa. What is that?”

“Officer, set us down there, near that hole, please,” barked the governor. The pilot complied. In two minutes, they all climbed out of the chopper and walked carefully to the side of the hole. They looked down, but nothing was visible except dirt.

“Alright,” said Pappas, “What the heck is going on? We all saw it.”

“Gentlemen, let’s cruise the rest and complete this survey,” said the governor in a calm, matter-of-fact way. With no other ideas, the two men got back into the chopper, flew over the remaining sites—seeing nothing unusual—and then returned to the Free Church site. Again, she looked down into the hole with the binoculars and this time she sat back in her seat. She handed the glasses to the other men who each looked again. They each were amazed. Pappas thought to point his cell phone down and snapped a few pictures with the camera.

The governor then said, “Officer, you can take us home now,” and the pilot flew the short distance back to the airport. She thanked him for the flight and his service and stood on the tarmac looking at the two men. As the helicopter lifted off and returned to its base, she asked, “What did we just see?”

Pappas looked at his phone. The pictures revealed nothing but darkened dirt, as in a deep hole. He pinched each one to enlarge the image, but nothing more was revealed. He showed it to the governor and the state trooper. They all looked at each other.

“Did we all imagine the same damn thing?” she asked, annoyed.

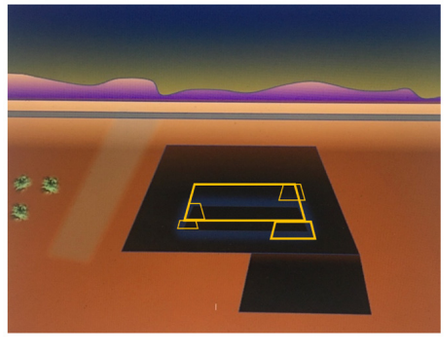
“Madam Governor, I saw a bright gold design, like an outline. Like an architectural drawing, like a floor plan,” said the trooper.

“And you, Mr. Pappas?” interrogated the governor.

“That is what I saw too,” Pappas said, and looked at the trooper who nodded in the affirmative.



“As did I, gentlemen,” she said, and continued, “I don’t know why I felt such an urgent need to do this flight today, or why I felt the prompt to invite you two along. You’re not on my staff. But you saw it too. I’m both scared and fascinated.”



“Why did my phone camera not make at least one image of it? Was it not bright?” Pappas asked.

“It was very clear and bright, I thought,” said Duvall. “Madam Governor, to your sight too?”

“It was crystal clear, and a beautiful golden color, if I may say so. Yes, like a drawing. I don’t know why your camera did not get that. We had better not speak of this right away, with no proof,” the governor said. “I don’t want to arouse panic or crowds of sightseers.”

Duvall rubbed his temples, “Agreed, Madam Governor.”

She laughed. “Yes Officer, crowd control is your department’s responsibility.”

She continued, “Thank you gentlemen, let’s sleep on this and confer again in a day or two. I appreciate your accompanying me today, and something inside me says you were supposed to be with me to see that—a new mystery.”

Each man agreed to keep what they saw a secret for the moment, and Bill and Carlos dropped Duvall back at the state police facility and took Pappas back with them to the capitol. They drove around the capitol once, then let the governor and Mr. Pappas out at the entrance circle. He said goodbye and walked back to his office

in the Bataan building, glancing up at the building's tower, as did many people these days. It now possessed a certain notoriety.

*Kuriosagapa stood near them, unseen, a look of love and concern on his face. He knew what they had seen. He knew what it meant. And he knew where it had come from. "The mystery unfolds with light . . ." he softly said.*

* * * * *

Contrary to many legends, wishful thinking, and even preaching, Christian prayer is not a magic spell to be cast. If anything, it is a work of faith which involves disciplined work. The two prayer groups were functioning well. The pastors' group and the church people group each met, with no agendas other than prayer. With the focus off themselves and on the spiritual battles they were in, there was very little hindrance of ego. They weren't asking for blessings or powerful signs or wonders. They were not even praying for revival or increased memberships. And it didn't generally occur to them to pray for new people to come to faith in Christ.

They spent their hour each week first, praising God just for Who He Is, then admitting their weaknesses, telling the Lord they were sorry for short-sightedness and previous ecclesiastical selfishness, and then asking for their daily bread, meaning His protection and wisdom as they would need it. There was little business as usual praying. It was mostly with clean intent, each week, and passionate. Oddly, they found themselves slowly growing in their mutual affection in Christ, despite their differences. The two priests generally attended the pastors' meeting and were content to just be present.

* * * * *

About a week later, on a bright and beautiful morning, Lieutenant Bruce Philipsburg received a secure call from a name he did not recognize—a General Mario Haldeman, the voice said, from United States Space Command in Colorado. He had provided the appropriate security protocol identifier information at the beginning of the call. The call itself set the lieutenant back. He was a lowly Air National Guard helicopter pilot, serving his country from a relatively remote air station in New Mexico.

"Yes sir, how can I be of service?" Philipsburg said.



"Lieutenant, I need you to meet with me on a matter of mutual interest," the general answered. "And it needs to be very soon."

"Sir, I can be on a plane tonight if you will authorize my travel," Philipsburg said.

"Very good," the general came back, "I will forward orders to your CO, and I will meet you at Peterson tomorrow." Peterson Space Force Base is located at Colorado Springs and was only an hour commuter flight from Santa Fe.

"Yes sir, I will coordinate with my CO and be there tomorrow as early as possible," Philipsburg complied.

"Very good, Lieutenant. I am e-mailing the orders now, and you can show them at the gate and find me in the Command Complex. Base security will direct you where to go. And son, do not speak of this to anyone other than your CO. Understood?"

"Completely, sir," Philipsburg answered.

"See you tomorrow then," and hung up.

Philipsburg sat back in his chair and exhaled, "Whew. Interesting. Doesn't happen every day, to be sure." He called Sarah, asked her to pack him a bag and meet him at the field. He told her nothing about his trip, and she understood but was naturally intrigued.

* * * * *

The lieutenant had flown into Peterson, but back when it was an Air Force Base. He flew to Colorado Springs, picked up his rental car, went by and checked into his hotel, drove on to the base, and past the Hartinger Building which is the HQ for Space Operations Command. He was in uniform, showed his ID at the gate, and said he had a meeting in the morning and wanted to know where to park. The security airman directed him to which lot, then he thanked him and turned around and went to his hotel for the night.

The next morning Philipsburg presented himself at the main entrance, was saluted crisply by the security airman and directed to Conference Room 4. He was invited in by another airman who offered him coffee from the carafe if he wished. The lieutenant did so, and remained standing, looking at the pictures on the walls. In

about five minutes the door opened and a two-star general entered, received Philipsburg's salute, and said, "At ease, Lieutenant, and thank you for coming. I am General Mario Haldeman. Have a seat, please."

"Sir," was all Philipsburg said and parked himself at the conference table.

The general had a laptop, turned it on and activated a connected overhead data projector. "Lieutenant," he said, "you probably wonder why we're here today. Take a look at this." An image that at first seemed very strange appeared on the screen. But very quickly the lieutenant recognized it. It looked very much like his church, at least partly. But by the black background and the star field behind, there was no way this could be his church. Could it?"

"Do I understand, son, that you attended one of the churches that disappeared in Santa Fe?" he asked.

"Yes sir, New Beginnings Christian Fellowship. The pastor is Stephen Menendez. He and his wife have been targeted by a drug gang, and we are guarding them closely even now," Philipsburg said and immediately wondered if he had volunteered more than the general needed.

"Yes, Lieutenant, I know. Look at this image now, please," and he clicked to another picture, obviously taken from space, which depicted what appeared to be a church-like structure. This image viewed the beautiful earth behind it. A third click on the laptop, an image shot from much further away, revealed a whole collection of such structures, appearing to float in space.

"One more for you to see, Lieutenant," and he brought up a fourth image, a close-up of what appeared to be the bottom edge of the first structure he had been shown. It appeared to be coming apart, and pieces of brick wall and concrete and steel footing were synchronously oriented to the rest of the structure but detached.

"Lieutenant Philipsburg, this certainly appears to be the full set of disappeared church structures. I think you call them Hit-G buildings," General Haldeman explained. "And they appear to be slowly deconstructing and losing altitude. Presumably, the sections or pieces will orbitally deteriorate and burn up in the atmosphere."



The Lieutenant could not suppress his feeling of shock. "Sir. I do not understand. These images appear to be in space. Over the Earth?"

"That is correct, son. They are in orbit together—twenty of them—at an orbital altitude of two hundred miles exactly opposite the International Space Station—the other side of the planet, so to speak. These images were captured by a secret recon satellite. When we detected them five days ago, we maneuvered the bird close in to study this thing."

At that point, another officer came into the room. He was wearing a strange uniform and was a full colonel. "Lieutenant, this is Colonel Jennings. He is the current Commander here at Space Command." The lieutenant stood and smartly saluted, returned by the colonel, who seated himself.

"Colonel, fill the lieutenant in on what we need from him please, sir."

"Lieutenant, as you know this has been a strange year for your city. I am aware you successfully crash-landed a chopper and saved yourself and your co-pilot. As well, we know you were caught in the crossfire of a drug gang incursion on Christmas Eve. I hope your foot is recovered. Your governor spoke with great commendation of you. With the discovery of these structures in space—and we have no idea yet how they got there—we thought you, a pilot and someone who has a personal interest in these structures might be able to serve as our local liaison as we try to get to the bottom of what happened. Would you be interested in such a responsibility? We would need to bring you on active duty."

Philipsburg did not hesitate for a moment. "Yes sir, of course. Anything I can do."

"Very good," said the general. "Spend some time today with the colonel and he will be in close touch with me as we delve into this. I am sure I do not need to emphasize that you must keep this completely confidential. A fresh clearance for you will be instigated, of course, for as long as this investigation lasts. We need to try to get in front of this. Whoever has this kind of technology and is using it, is of top importance in Washington. You might have thought these disappearances had been forgotten."

"Yes sir, I will be happy to serve the colonel and my country in any way I can. Shall I plan to transfer here?" he asked.

"No, Lieutenant, that will not be necessary. We need someone there in Santa Fe. We understand you have good connections there and that will be of use to you," the general said. "Plus, it will make for a better investigation if the press and public do not try to sniff out what we're doing. Keep as low a profile as you can."

"Yes sir. As you wish. I will confer with the colonel today, as you said and stand by in Santa Fe. Will my active status include flying?" he asked hopefully.

Colonel Jennings laughed, "Of course, Lieutenant. As long as you're medically qualified, we wouldn't think of making you a desk jockey. Your missions will be stealth-recon tasked, flying Pave Hawks out of your station in Kirtland, in Albuquerque. You may fill your wife in on a very limited basis, but each day will probably include different trajectories and routes. You may need to get a billet at Kirtland, for the time being. Your wife can join you there as much as you wish, but you will be flying daily. And one more thing, we are promoting you to the rank of captain. Congratulations," and shook his hand, while handing him a small felt box. Philipsburg smiled and saluted. He said, "I would not have predicted this, sir, but I am honored and will do my best at any mission."

*Kuriosagapa was present for this moment and said to himself, "Promotion. What a strange and wonderful idea for my charge" and in a uniquely angelic way, smiled and uttered one more phrase, "Praise be to the King."*

88

Around dusk one night, Jim Pappas said to Karen Asnat, "Honey let's go over to the New Beginnings Hit-G. I saw something there on that overflight with the governor that I want to look at again."

Karen, always a little cautious about unplanned excursions, said, "Really?"

"You can wait in the car if you like. I want another quick look," Jim said.

"Alright," she quietly replied, "If you think so."

They drove to the site and indeed, Karen chose to stay in the car. Pappas walked over to the hole—it was almost fully dark now, about eight thirty. He looked down but then stepped back. He calmed himself and went over to the car and tried to act cheerful. She put her window down.



"C'mere. Look at this," he requested.

She had grown to trust this man and complied. They walked slowly over and looked in, about three feet from the edge. No one got close to Hit-G edges these days. They were both startled. Karen latched on to Pappas' arm and steadied them both. In the hole was the same golden outline at the bottom. But this time it was blinking!

"Oh, my goodness gracious, and holiest of holy craps!" she said.

Pappas laughed. "Karen, something is going on. You and I both know that. And somehow, I think we're supposed to see this." She was silent and followed him again to the edge. Her fear was gone, and she felt calm.

They watched the blinking outline. It was a pattern. The outline seemed to be blinking on and off, but not abruptly. The blinking was gentle, fading in and out.

Short-blink long blink and two shorts. Then two shorts. Then two longs and a short. Then four shorts. Then one long. It took a few iterations as they watched before Karen said, "This is international Morse code!"

He looked into the hole. Then at her. Then into the hole. Then to the sky and said loudly, "I love this woman."

"Yes," he said, repeating the pattern. "Dot-dash-dot-dot. Dot-dot. Dash-dash-dot. Dot-dot-dot-dot. Dash."

She said, "L-I-G-H-T. Jim, this is not accidental."

Pappas huffed, "Welcome to New Mexico. The patron state of weird stuff."

Then they were both surprised by complete darkness in the hole. The outline disappeared. Nothing. Nothing but that strange, pleasant aroma which was there again faintly.

He said, "Smell that?"

Karen said, "Ok sir, now I'm scared," and no sooner did she utter those words than a warm glow appeared along the side of the hole. The glow grew and in a couple of seconds they were again confronted by a tall angel. They held on to each other.

The angel sharpened into focus. He was as crisp and fully present as the time before—like he was more real than they were. He stood there motionless, as before. He was not menacing and neither Jim nor Karen reacted as such. They were not relaxed but they were not terrified. They just waited.

The angel looked intently at them with a look of affection. He said nothing and did not move at all. He appeared to be attired differently, in some sort of armor. They saw at his side a long scabbard which glowed differently, brighter. What was in the scabbard was covered but somehow, they sensed what it was. He smiled slightly, then spoke simply in a tongue that was beautiful and powerful, such as they had only heard once before. It was again, wholly otherworldly and timeless. It made them wish for more.

The angel said, “Yes daughter, light, a word you have heard before. As you have seen, evil is moving. But fear not. He who sits in the heavens laughs.” And he faded quickly and was gone.

No reaction seemed appropriate to either of them but to sit on the ground and weep. It was a weeping of joy. Karen remembered and softly sang a quote from a psalm she had recently learned,

> The Lord will keep you from all evil; He will keep your soul. The Lord will guard your going out and your coming in, from this time forth and forever.

Pappas had heard the song too and he was lost in wonder at here, yet another bonding moment of power and love.

* * * * *

Jim Pappas met Avon Duvall at Alamos Brew the next morning for coffee. Duvall was off work and Pappas took the day off. They sat, and Duvall scanned all around these days as had become his custom. All was calm.

Pappas sipped his cappuccino. Then he said, “Avon, Karen and I went over to the New Beginnings hole last night.”

Duvall’s expression didn’t change, but he stopped his scanning and leaned forward. “And?” he asked.



Pappas then quieted his voice. “Since our flight, and what we saw, I wanted to go back there. So, we did. The outline was there, Avon. Down in the hole. But,” and he looked around as if someone was recording his testimony.

“Relax, Jim. What?” said Duvall.

“Um . . . you’re gonna think I’m on something.”

“C’mon. Spit it out,” Duvall said.

“It started blinking,” Pappas said and looked down at the table.

“Blinking,” Duvall flatly said.

“Yes, Avon, blinking. And it was Karen who saw that it was a pattern.”

“A pattern,” Duvall said flatly again, like this was a courtroom interrogation.

Jim sat back, stood up, then sat back down. “I’m not kidding Avon. You know that. It was blinking. And if I wanted you to think I’m nuts I would maybe make this next part up, because maybe I am nuts. The pattern was something she recognized.”

“Recognized,” the state trooper repeated again in a quiet voice.

“Will you stop that?” said Pappas, irritated. “I’m not shitting you,” and immediately felt bad for using a vulgarity to a state police officer.

Duvall chuckled. “Jim, I am sorry. Tell me what she thought she was seeing.”

“And I was seeing,” added Pappas. “It was—we memorized it—short-blink-long blink-and two shorts. Then two shorts. Then two longs and a short. Then four shorts. Then one long.”

“What?” said Duvall.

“The outline was there, as we saw from the chopper. It was blinking. Dot-dash-dot-dot. Dot-dot. Dash-dash-dot. Dot-dot-dot-dot. Dash-dash.”

Duvall's eyebrow could not go higher and he said in a very sarcastic tone, "The golden Hit-G outline blinks to you and your girlfriend in Morse code. Right. Did you sniff some funky weed with her before you decided to trapse on over there?"

Pappas was motionless. He stared at Duvall. "And there's more."

"Please, tell me, because I need more evidence to arrest you right here for felony craziness," the officer said, half serious and half in jest.

Pappas carefully, so as not to attract attention, looked around with a couple of short jerky glances. "Avon, the angel appeared again."

Duvall unconsciously reached his hand to his side, but remembered he was out of uniform. He looked at Pappas and said in that same bland and quiet tone, "I believe you."

"I don't do funky weed, officer. This is real," Pappas said.

Both were quiet for maybe a whole minute. "You gonna tell me what it said?" Duvall asked, not assuming anything.

"It's not an it, it's a he," Pappas lectured. "And yes, he did speak. A little. He spoke to Karen. You need to hear it from her though. I think she wants to tell you."

"When does that happen?" asked the officer, finally adding some lilt to his voice. He was tired of acting the ever-composed state trooper.

"Tonight, come over, can you?" Pappas asked.

"Yeah, yeah of course," Duvall replied.

"Be at Karen's at seven o'clock. Cohen and McConnell will be there too."

"How much do they know?" Duvall asked.

"Some. Seven o'clock."

"Yeah okay."

* * * * *



Karen had made a pitcher of sweet iced tea with lemon in it—she knew they all liked that—and Cohen and McConnell brought a gigantic "big-ass" supreme pizza, as Cohen termed it. Duvall showed up and they all sat around, jovial, ate the pizza and enjoyed Karen's iced tea. The conversation was small-talk and humorous, but they all sensed something was up.

Cohen deepened the tone. "What has happened, you all? I sensed there was more on the agenda than only the finest pizza I ever ate. Especially with one of New Mexico's finest among us," and grinned at Duvall, who grinned back. "Protecting our state—protecting each other," he recited.

Pappas took the cue and filled them all in. This was the first Mindy McConnell had heard about any angels. Expectedly, she was skeptical. At first, she glared at both Pappas and Karen and stood up briefly. But when she looked at Karen and Duvall, she got the impression they were dead serious. "CNN would fire me so fast," she quietly quipped and sat back down.

"This is real, Mindy," Karen said slowly. "I was not looking for this on some quest, and neither was Jim."

"I actually received a letter." She took it out and showed it to Mindy and Cohen, who examined it very carefully. They were tactful and respectful enough to not dismiss it outright as a hoax.

Karen went on. "We saw in the New Beginnings hole that same glowing outline. It was blinking or fading in and out in a gentle kind of way, the dots and dashes we said. Do any of you know or remember Morse code?"

Cohen said, "Of course," and nobody was surprised.

Karen slowly recited, "Dot-dash-dot-dot. Dot-dot. Dash-dash-dot. Dot-dot-dot-dot. Dash-dash."

Cohen sat back with a look of surprise, then picked up the letter. He said, "L-I-G-H-T."

"Yes Bob," said Karen with a small choke, and then with tears in her eyes.

Mindy sat perfectly rigid. “Light,” she said. “As in . . .” she read from the letter, “the mystery unfolds with light?”

“I think so. The angel said to me, ‘Yes daughter. Light. A word you have heard before.’ He said that. I am sure he was confirming a connection between this letter and what we saw. I know it seems so hokey.” She was almost bawling now.

This melted Mindy’s journalistic frost a bit. It wasn’t going to thaw completely—it still seemed to her like a fairy tale in trite kind of way. She had been a journalist long enough to take some stories as they come before judging their veracity.

Cohen then said something which surprised them all. “Since this whole peculiar chapter in our lives started, I have had the word ‘light’ in my head. Not as in Bud Lite, which I could use a six or two right now—but as in illumination. Karen, that letter—strange as it is—and this glow thing in the hole, which you and Avon say you saw, and the governor too, this cannot be an accident or a hallucination. I believe you, Karen.”

She went over and hugged him. “Thank you, Bob.”

“Before we start setting up a big revival tent and selling tickets,” Mindy said, “what does it mean?”

Karen composed herself and said very quietly, “I’m not sure, but I think the word ‘light’ from the letter and the blinking thing must be connected. If I’m not crazy and if these things are real, I think they must somehow connect. I know it all seems so unlikely, so out of this world, but we are involved with some things that are quite unusual,” Karen said.

“Karen and Jim. Say you are not crazy—not completely, and you’re not being paid a big pile of money to pull the wool over the whole country’s eyes,” Mindy said, and Bob frowned and interrupted. “Hey, even my cynicism has limits,” he said in a monotone, to keep the conversation moving.

Mindy went on. “And if you’ve not ingested a dose of a new hallucinogenic, and if you’ve not been duped by the government to think you saw and heard an angel . . .”

“Mindy, what if all those conditions are dismissed, and we’re left with what we have told you?” Karen asked.



“Then I think, since we’re good friends now, that we should carry it forward and see what happens,” Mindy announced.

Here Cohen started laughing, and Pappas welcomed it. “I can see the headline now: ‘New Mexico’s Finest Investigators Unravel Mystery of the Century.’ Hey, I’m game. Let’s do as she says, carry it forward until there’s some reason to not believe it.”

“And since the Air Guard chopper went down right at New Beginnings,” Cohen said, Let’s call the lieutenant and get him in on this. I mean, before we tell this all to the governor. Although I am sure she must be anxious for an explanation for what we all saw.”

All this time Avon Duvall had kept silent. Now he spoke. “Folks, I do not doubt that strange events have been occurring. I reserve judgment on the appearance of angels and secret letters. I never believed Mormon-like stories as a rule, but it seems to me that dismissal of any explanation is premature. I agree with you. Let’s carry this out. I do think we need to bring our governor in at some point soon, but for the moment, let’s bring our chopper pilot friend up to speed and see what he can contribute. I think he’s earned a seat at this table.”

Cohen took the lead. “So does anyone object to bringing the lieutenant up to date?”

No one objected. Cohen continued. “I’ll contact him and set up a meeting. I think we all need to be there, agreed?” All agreed, even McConnell who was still the most unconvinced of any of this. They finished the last of the pizza, said their goodbyes, and began to depart for the evening. As she was putting on her jacket, Mindy noticed that Karen was avoiding eye contact. She went to her and hugged her and laying aside any frivolity, she said, “Karen, my friend, I want to believe you. I really do. Please be patient with me,” and smiled. Karen smiled back and hugged her.

* * * * *

Four days would pass before all of them could get together, which Pappas thought was fine. They all needed to catch their collective breath and have time to individually think and reflect.

They rendezvoused at Karen’s apartment. No pizza this time, just coffee and tea. Cohen and McConnell sat on the couch, Pappas in a dining room chair, Karen next

to him in a dining room chair. Duvall and Philipsburg, both in uniform, came in last, and seated themselves on dining room chairs, making a circle.

Cohen asked, “Yo, what is this? You got promoted to captain?”

“Yes, I did. I’m flying more now and they brought me back on to active duty. Sarah is okay with it and she comes up to Kirtland a day or two at a time when I’m not flying,” Philipsburg explained. Cohen knew not to press further and let it be.

Pappas took it from there. “Captain, we wanted you to know some things that have happened recently. They’re weird but,” he tried to tone his voice in a lighter way, “we are confident that you can take it,” and he laughed nervously.

“Thank you, Jim. Shoot,” was the captain’s response.

Pappas then explained the letter, the angel’s appearances, the sighting of the outline in the one Hit-G hole, making sure to stress that he, Duvall, and the governor had all seen it together, and its blinking. Last, he explained that it was blinking Morse code, a single word, light.

Philipsburg shifted his sitting position—his foot still bothered him which in turn made Mindy and Karen shift in their chairs too. They had not completely rid themselves of the uncomfortable memories of Christmas Eve.

The pilot did not show any expression of surprise at all. He listened carefully and then asked, “May I see the letter, Karen?” She took it out of the envelope and carefully handed it to him. He read it and said, “This is amazing and I must say, I completely believe it is authentic and I’m not even sure why.”

He went on. “But Morse code? Isn’t that a little retro?”

“It is,” Cohen added. “And yet, Captain, what could be more easily understood than that? And if somehow a higher power is involved, would not that power,” he used air quotes, “if it wanted to communicate, use a universally recognized way to do so?”

This rationale for the use of Morse code seemed to make sense to the captain and to the rest too. Then the captain, uncharacteristically and impulsively, did something he may well have regretted. He stood up, walked around, rubbed his



forehead, and then said, “I can’t say too much. And the theory, let’s call it that, I am going to tell you, must remain in this group. I think I know what happened to the buildings.”

Cohen jumped up, “Holy crap!”

Mindy and Pappas both leaned forward in their seats.

“That’s all I’m going to say tonight,” the captain said. “You must not mention that anyone thinks they might have an answer to New Mexico’s greatest mystery ever. Not yet. You need to trust me. That’s the word, my friends. Trust me.”

Karen unfolded the letter again, looked at it but remained quiet. Pappas looked at her and knew what she was looking at. “Exults with trust,” Karen said. “I trust you Bruce. I do.”

And out of nowhere Mindy commented, “We would all feel some serious happy if that mystery was somehow solved. I think it’s worth our wait if there is any chance of that happening. And I am the most impatient journalist there is!”

“Indeed she is, folks, and I can attest to that, being the incurable newshound that I have become,” and he laughed and walked over to the window and took a glance outside.

“I don’t know,” Pappas said. “This seems to me to be an important moment. Seems like we should mark it somehow, but I don’t know what to do.”

At the risk of seeming trite, Karen said, “Everybody stand up and get in a circle.”

Cohen bristled. “Kum by Yah . . .,” to which Mindy shot, “Get over here Mr. Hungry Newshound,” and grabbed his hand.

As they were all now holding hands, Karen sheepishly and nervously said, “Bow your heads.”

Cohen could not help saying, “A new yoga exercise?” and Mindy stepped on his foot. The six of them did as instructed. Karen was silent a moment and then spoke quietly.

"My Lord, hear us now please. We have been so beaten down these past few months. But Lord, look at us here. We are friends because of what has happened and we have grown stronger. I read in your Bible yesterday, 'count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.' We do not understand much but we wish for . . . Lord we pray for you to work in this situation and help us to understand," and she started to weep, a joyful kind of weeping. The captain continued for her, or with her, or with all of them:

"Yes Lord, as Karen said, we ask you to move among us and through us. We all sense something important has been happening this year. We have seen some hard times but I know you are with us. Show yourself please, as you see best and we will wait on you. In Jesus's name, in *Yeshua's* name, Amen."

*Unbeknownst to any of them, Kuriosagapa was standing behind and towering above the captain. He even laid a hand on the captain's shoulder. Looking up and beyond that place, he uttered, "Yes O King. I praise You. Would you work for these dear ones. You are mighty and Your loyal love is powerful."*

Cohen was silent and stepped back, turning, covering his eyes. Mindy was most surprised and grasped his hand but let him retain his dignity. He said, looking out the window, "I feel like someone was with us," and he walked out the door. Mindy turned, smiled, and said to the rest, "Something happened here today folks, and although CNN would love to hear of it, it belongs to us and to us alone."

* * * * *

Heather Marcos had decided to attempt a continuance of her masquerade. She went back to work after a couple of days off after the capitol attack. Somehow no one had made the connection between her and the presence of Julio and Sergio as combatants, as they were called by the governor. Not terrorists. The term combatants subtly entailed a higher level of threat, almost as if they had been part of an organized military attack. The attempt to eliminate the governor and Robert Cohen with use of a decoyed remotely fired weapon, and to slip in a significant cache of narcotics under the guise of an art delivery was clever. It was a brazen assault coupled with an aggressive plan to undermine all interference by the law enforcement community. The *Demônios* gang's inability to anticipate the addition of a remotely deployed and piloted helicopter, plus the fortunate tip of Marcos' involvement was the plot's undoing. Marcos was unrepentant. It saddened her



greatly for the loss of the two men and angered her and motivated her to deepen her own commitment to the mission of the gang. If it were not for one factor, she would throw herself on the fire of the insurrection and its great profits—the emergence of Julianna into her life.

For all practical purposes Marcos had virtually inherited the safe house. She searched Julio's files and online accounts to discover whatever legal documents there might be as to its disposition. She saw no immediate reason to expedite insurance matters or any other contingencies that might ensue as a result of Julio's unexpected demise. She assumed *Demônios* higher ups would appear soon enough to adjust the gang's local holdings. She was known to them as loyal and they were in no way known to her. The snag in any future for her was Julianna. Strangely, she found that she had cared so greatly for her sad *prima* in a way that she had never cared for anyone save for her own mother.

* * * * *

Julianna had been seeing Sally, her social worker, regularly. Sally had been doing her professional best with Julianna but had also been carefully nurturing the young woman's spiritual formation. Julianna had attended church services and was full of questions. Sally had not been confrontational about Julianna's employment but no one would have questioned its unhealthy nature. Sally wanted to let Julianna come to her own understanding and to her own decisions. Julianna certainly needed no scolding or shaming, while at the same time her own sense of humiliation was pure and unmasked. As to the intricacies and complicated nature of that shame, Julianna herself was starting to understand. Sally was there for support and as a friend, unconditionally. This friendship was a new thing for Julianna. The fact that Sally was both a professional and deeply religious woman did not intimidate Julianna in the least.

They met for coffee or tea or lattes or macchiatos often, generally at Alamos Brew. Some sessions were light-hearted with no agenda. Others were more like counseling meetings. On one particular morning, Julianna wanted to go deeply into what she was feeling—spiritually. She decided to let all caution fly and ask Sally a question. Julianna began, "Sally, is God here? I mean, is he around?"

Sally was startled at the immediacy of the question but she adjusted quickly. "Yes, he is. We do not see Him and we do not hear Him but that is the wonder of faith,

Julianna. Faith helps me to see Him and to feel His love for me even though I don't deserve it."

"Yes, you do, Sally!" Julianna interrupted. "If anyone does, you deserve God's presence."

Sally shook her head and chuckled. "No, dear, I do not. I may look to you like a good person but this is the thing that is clear to me. To a holy God—and believe me, He is wonderfully holy—on my best days, I cannot attain . . . or meet His holiness. If I gave up all of the bad things in my life, the obvious ones and the secret ones, even the deepest dark feelings in my heart, I would still fall short. That is why I need Jesus, the Savior. He provides me with His righteousness. Sally felt like this was a good moment and she reached in her handbag and pulled out a Gideon New Testament and read:

> And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.

"You see Julianna, righteousness is granted to this bride. It is not her righteousness but Jesus's own wonderful righteousness. Her wedding dress, fine linen, is given to her as a gift. Then she is ready for the wedding," Sally recited. That distracted Julianna.

"Oh, I would love to have a wedding. A beautiful wedding where my man loved me and would be proud of me," Julianna said. "But I am so ruined, Sally. I have had so many men and I am so *desgastado,* so tired." She lowered her head and put her hands over her eyes. "I am just so *desgastada.*"

"I know you are, Julianna. Jesus knows it too and he sees past it to the beautiful soul that you are. Do you think He is paying attention to you right now?" Sally asked.

Julianna looked up. "I don't know. Maybe. I would love to see Him. But I cannot. But if He were here, I think He would listen to me." She stopped and thought,



searching for a word she rarely used, "I think He would forgive me. Oh, how I would love that."

"He would, you know, dear. He would," Sally said still quietly. No one in the coffee shop was paying attention to them. It was one of the most quiet, peaceful, and intimate moments she had ever experienced. Then she offered, "Would you like me to pray for you?"

"*Si*, *yes*, would you?" Julianna said almost in a whisper. Sally barely bowed her head and closed her eyes. Julianna did the same. Sally spoke for about a minute. She was not preachy-praying the way Christians sometimes do. She was talking only to Jesus. Like He was right there. She thanked Him for her friend. And she really passionately, almost with a desperation, asked Him to rescue this woman. She said, "Lord, I care about Julianna but I know You do far more, and You died on the cross for her. Would You come into her life and give her Your righteousness. I know that will change her. That would give her a new life. I am asking. I am begging, Lord," and then she kind of regretted using that word. But Julianna wasn't put off by it. She was in a begging, desperate mood herself. And out of her mouth quietly came, "*Si.*" They both said, "Amen," and looked up at each other and smiled.

Julianna didn't immediately feel any buzz, or rush of joy. In fact, she looked around the room to see if anything had changed. It had not. Sally sat back in her chair, sipped her coffee, and felt at peace. She didn't need to press because when God was working, the work would be done. She looked at Julianna, who was still looking around.

Sally said, "Thank you dear, for letting me pray. I do it often and you can pray to Him, trusting in Him completely, at any time." Then she gave Julianna the New Testament, who took it into her hands like a precious jewel. She did not now or ever had owned a Bible.

She said, "Thank you, Sally. I will not understand very well, I do not think, what I read but maybe you can help me?"

"I will be happy to do so, at any time," was all Sally said and all she needed to say.

Captain Bruce Philipsburg was flying reconnaissance missions several times each week, driving back and forth between Kirtland Air Force Base and Santa Fe. His wife, Sarah, was with him in Albuquerque some weeks and at home at other times. She was content to "flex and roll," as she called it, because she knew that these were extraordinary times.

Since he had been brought into the confidence of an unimaginable revelation concerning the churches-in-space, he was even more alert to anything going on around Santa Fe that might lend understanding to how this thing could happen. He was in close touch with his commanding officer, Colonel Jennings, and with General Mario Haldeman, by videoconference at least once per week. Although in the beginning days of his new posting, the mission was a little vague, the captain was motivated and vigilant. He was given a general trajectory of routes that surveilled the mountains, the areas south of Santa Fe, all approaches to Kirtland itself and other investigative paths that were seemingly illogical. The service ceiling of the HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter was 14,000 feet and several times he was ordered to specific flight plans at that altitude. On those occasions he was accompanied by a special airman equipped with a new scanning device, which the captain noticed was aimed up. After a few of these special, high-altitude assignments he felt the freedom to ask the general if he could bring him up to speed on what they were looking for.

"That's need-to-know, Captain," said the general.

"Yes sir, I understand, but . . ." pressed Philipsburg.

Colonel Jennings said, "General, the captain might be more effective as the pilot on these missions if he had a better idea of the nature of our high-altitude inquiries." The general looked at them intently, rubbed his eyes and sighed.

He then said, "Captain, the structures in orbit—the photos I showed you—were somehow sent there or brought there by technology that we suspect originates in South America. We are watching, with some unique, new, and prototypical equipment, for some trace of a beam or a particle wave pattern that might leave



an electronic trail. If our search doesn't result in resolution of this, it could and probably will happen again." Philipsburg listened and nodded in understanding.

The colonel then said, "General, if somehow our chopper was disabled and the detection equipment lost, should the pilots be empowered to destroy the device?"

"That might be normal SOP, Colonel, and if this was a Norden bombsite and it was eighty years ago, then yes, frag the sucker if anything goes awry. But this is the only one of these things we have so far, so Captain, you are not only flying recon missions but you are involved in R&D work here too. It is vital that you are on your game for each and every one of these missions."

"Yes sir, I understand, sir," was all the pilot could say.

* * * * *

Heather Marcos was in the safe house, enjoying a dinner visit from Julianna. It did not occur to Heather to invite her cousin to live there with her, and it did not occur to Julianna to request such a thing. They headed to Heather's car to go back into town when Heather stopped, and said, "Julianna, do you smell something funny?"

Julianna stopped and sniffed, "Yes, I do. It is kind of nice, *si*?" Heather sniffed again.

"It is sweet smelling, very pleasant, don't you think?" Heather said.

They stepped outside to look around and, at that moment, a blue beam enveloped the house, with no sound other than a creaking protestation from the house itself. Both women froze. They watched the house glow blue, then disappear. It did not take long, just a moment. The house was gone and a hole that was the exact footprint of the house gaped, with a certain vaporous aftereffect. The sweet smell grew intense for a few seconds and then began to dissipate. The women watched this whole thing and were terrified. Everything else in the neighborhood remained the same.

Julianna then murmured, "*Prima*, we were just in there!" Heather shook her head and grabbed Julianna and held her close. As with the Hit-G churches, the transfer was clean. Nothing left but dirt walls. The women did not venture to the edge to investigate.

The network administrator was not privy to Professor João Manuel Hernández's research into matter-transport nor did she even know who he was. His deep membership in the *Demônios Elevados* and the presence within the gang of someone of his intelligence and scientific expertise would have terrified even a woman like Heather. But here was something terrifying happening in front of their eyes. One minute they were outside the lovely safe house, and the next minute nothing was safe. The house was gone and a giant hole left in its wake. They saw it and they smelled it. And it was the most incredible thing either had ever seen in their lives.

As it happened, Captain Bruce Philipsburg was returning from overflying the mountains west of Santa Fe near the Las Campanas neighborhood.

The flight technician, over the intercom, said, "Captain, I've got something interesting," and he made a couple of adjustments on the scanning device. He also hit two switches on a special digital recording device attached to the scanner.

"Copy that, Lieutenant. Will hover stationary briefly," answered the captain.

"I've made the recording, Captain. All is quiet again," replied the technician.

"Returning to base," Philipsburg said, and aimed the helicopter back to Kirtland.

* * * * *

Heather a.k.a. Maria and Julianna stood, trembling. The terror slowly calmed since there were no after-effects. No aliens. No terrible noises. No re-appearance of anything. Just the normal neighborhood sounds and the wind. Heather looked at Julianna and said, "My car was in the garage. We need to call an Uber and find a motel or something."

"We can go to my room in town," Julianna suggested but then said, "No. You would not like that. Let's do as you say." Heather called an Uber and requested pick-up at the end of the block so as not to arouse any questions.

There was nothing left of the house, so all of Heather's belongings as well as her vehicle were gone. She did have her phone, but no charger, so she knew she needed to preserve its charge for the moment. The Uber arrived and the driver seemed half-asleep so that was good. No questions. She directed him to her office



in town where she had a charger and a couple of extra credit cards. She thought about it and felt it would be far more prudent to cast herself as a victim of a powerful mystery, like all those church people. Yes—that would work nicely because that's exactly what she was. And as she thought about it, any incriminating evidence that might have lingered from Julio and Sergio and their operations in the house, they're all gone. She would play this up to the governor and that might put her in a position to score some state benefits that would tide her over and give her time to re-connect with *Demônios* leadership.

The driver took the two fares to the capitol and Heather left Julianna in the car to wait with the driver. She was in and out in ten minutes with a number of items in a spare handbag. This would do fine. Julianna, of course, was clueless about anything other than what had just happened. The two went to a Holiday Inn Express for the night—in fact, Heather booked three nights—and after getting settled, downing some sherry that Heather retrieved from her office, they went to dinner in a nice restaurant and finally relaxed. For each woman, what they had seen was one of the most amazing things they had ever witnessed. Neither was in any hurry, nor had any need to talk. They warmed each other with that unspoken, intangible family love that is so often shared between loved ones in a crisis.

Finally, Julianna spoke. The sherry made her feel loose and she spoke freely. "You know, *prima*, my boss says we are all animals. He says there is no such thing as the supernatural. There are no deep mysteries in the world—we are just animals and some get more of what they want than others."

* * * * *

Philipsburg reviewed the video and saw a beam envelop the seemingly random house in Las Campanas, and he referred to the Jeppesen map on his screen. It was not there long. It was a light blue beam, consistent all along its path and directed from the sky further than he could see. The recon-airman-tech had aimed the camera almost straight up and caught the beam, but it was lost in the clouds out of which it had emerged. Then it was gone. The airman then aimed the camera at the ground and recorded the hole in the ground. Clean. Utterly empty. No traffic in the area or on-lookers that could be seen—except two women, standing quite close to the site. The camera caught them briefly, staring, holding on to each other. Then the video ended.

The captain immediately sent the digital record to Colonel Jennings who sent it to General Haldeman. After watching it three times, and without consulting anyone else, he sent it to Governor Grimley. She then sent it to Trooper Avon Duvall and to Historic Preservation staffer Jim Pappas. The governor attached a note. “Please come see me at the office ASAP.” Pappas responded immediately, but Duvall had not seen it yet.

* * * * *

Pappas was escorted into the governor’s office, noting that the door to Heather Marcos’s office was closed. Apparently, she was not in today. The governor was cordial but did not invite him to sit. She said, “Mr. Pappas, you saw the video. It came to me from Captain Philipsburg’s new associates at Space Command.”

“What?” Pappas said, with surprise.

“The house apparently disappeared from some sort of beam as you could see. It came from the atmosphere somehow and it is believed that this is somehow connected to the Hit-G situation. I want you to do something for me. I want you to go to this address and collect some soil, take it to that lab for the same testing you did when I got burned. Can you do that for me?” She rubbed her hand autonomically.

“Yes, Madam Governor.”

“Please, Jim, in here you can call me Lucy. You’ve earned it,” and she smiled.

Pappas found that hard to do and repeated, “Yes, I will help any way you need.”

“Report to me as soon as you learn anything, please. Immediately. And tell no one except you can get Trooper Duvall to help you if you wish,” the governor said. “Now get going please. This video is less than an hour old.”

Pappas nodded, almost saluted but caught himself and closed her office door behind him. He worked his way out of the capitol and to his Ridgeline. The governor gave him the address and he called Avon Duvall, who was willing to meet him at the address in about twenty-five minutes.



Pappas was there with his satchel when Duvall pulled up. They shook hands, looked into the hole and Duvall remarked, “Yup. It’s clean gone.” Both almost half-expected to see a golden, glowing, Morse-code messaging outline, but there was nothing except the flat bottom of the hole. The fragrance was still slightly detectable.

Pappas got down on his knees, sniffed, and scooped out with a trowel a small amount of dirt into a clear, plastic container, being careful not to touch any, and covered it with a lid. He put the container into his satchel and said to the trooper, “Let’s get outta here.”

Duvall laughed and was willing to leave but said, “Let’s look around for a minute, then we’ll go.” Pappas agreed, placed his satchel in his Ridgeline and joined the trooper for a stroll.

“The latest chapter in the Saga of Santa Fe keeps us from getting bored, Jim, don’t you think?” Duvall mused.

“Yes, bored is something I never am,” Pappas retorted. “But this has got to be the strangest coupling of science, mystery, and intrigue!”

They walked around the neighborhood. Duvall was looking for something but didn’t know what it was. He sensed there was more going on here than the random disappearance of yet another Santa Fe building, albeit this one was not a church.

“What are you looking for, Avon?” asked Pappas.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But I think there was something going on here.”

“You haven’t seen the video yet?” Pappas asked Duvall.

“What video?” Duvall answered.

“The governor sent it to you. She got it and copied you and me.”

Duvall pulled out his phone, accessed his secure e-mail server, saw the attached video, and watched it. “Holy Moses,” was all he could say. He watched it again and pinched the last few seconds to enlarge the image.

“Did you look at the two women carefully?” he asked.

“No, I didn’t. I assumed they were two women passing by,” Pappas said.

“Look again,” Duvall showed him his phone.

“Wow, that’s Heather Marcos and someone else,” Pappas said, more quietly, as if the whole neighborhood was listening.

“Indeed, it is,” said Duvall. “What’s she doing here?”

Pappas looked around. Something seemed strange but for no discernible reason. Duvall spoke, “As you said. Let’s get outta here,” and they both walked briskly back to their vehicles. “Let me know what you find out about that dirt. The plot thickens!”

The two men drove off in different directions, Pappas towards the DPS Forensics Lab. He had called Tina there to give her a heads-up that he was bringing in another questionable soil sample. She was waiting for him when he arrived, took the sample, and assured him of the earliest possible analysis of this pound of dirt as she called it. He indicated, without specifically mentioning the governor’s rush on this, that the urgency came from the highest source.

Duvall, meanwhile, drove back to state police barracks where he was coming off shift soon. He needed a beer.

* * * * *

Pappas didn’t need to be invited back to the forensics lab first thing the next morning. He informed his co-workers that he was on a governor’s office assignment and went there directly as the day began. Tina had worked on the analysis for several hours into the night and looked haggard when she brought Pappas into her part of the lab.

They sat down at a table, the dirt sample in its container between them. She began, “Jim, this dirt mystery gets weirder and also clearer at the same time. Do you remember what I told you when we tested this last time?”

“Sure. The toxic effect was a superacid or something but that there were three unknown compounds also part of the mix,” Pappas responded.



“I think I’ve solved the unknown elements part. As it turns out, when certain kinds of matter have been exposed to certain kinds of energy in space . . .,” she paused briefly, looking to see if that got any reaction from Pappas. She had not been brought in on any of the confidential aspects of any of these investigations—she was a lab scientist, not a law enforcement person, not an FBI agent, not any kind of a legal investigator. But officially Pappas was none of those things either. She did see the slightest, involuntary twitch in Pappas’ eyebrow. She thought, *hmm . . . I’ve hit a nerve.* She continued, “. . . and if a piece of matter, in space, like experiments have shown on the International Space Station, is exposed to certain kinds of focused energy, if it is a complex combination of several elements, some of their basic chemical components can be altered, taking on an otherwise unidentifiable profile.”

Pappas started to get that glazed look on his face that people took on sometimes when she began to get technical. She said, “Are you following me?”

He said, “Enough. So what does that mean in this case?”

“We call it ‘plasmatized restructuring.’ Some elements appear to change their ID into something aberrant. They don’t really, but they give readings as hyper-registered, off the charts, if you will. Their atomic weights masquerade as something above the element Oganesson, 118, which, as I’m sure you know, is a noble gas. When you do an ultraprecise measurement of the mass of a subatomic particle called the W boson, it may diverge from the Standard Model and suggest a faux element. I think that’s what we’ve got here with this soil sample and the previous one you brought me last year. It didn’t occur to me then that we had plasmatized restructuring, but I thought of it last night when . . .” and she cut herself off.

“When, what?” Pappas asked.

“I overheard you mention to that state trooper that you’re buddies with, that the beam, I think you said, might have had some effect. Mr. Pappas, none of my business of course, but that got me thinking. If this soil has somehow been exposed to some form of focused energy from a platform or even something from space, out of the atmosphere, that might induce some plasmatized restructuring to your soil sample. It is a new designation, is rare so far, and is a phenomenon that never happens on the earth’s surface but was discovered on the ISS. The Russians have

published some research from their space program." She laughed quickly. "Of course, the Russkies tend to be stingy with sharing any of their research."

Pappas was both excited and exhausted. He looked at her. He wanted to tell her that what she suspected—this plasmatized restructuring—was in fact what had apparently occurred. But he held back. Except to wink at her and say, in a very monotone voice, "Thank you Tina. You are smarter than I can imagine. Please, on behalf of our governor, and to protect my integrity, do not repeat this, at least not yet, to anyone. I would appreciate that, and I expect it will soon become a matter of state and national security."

She looked around, as if their conversation was being recorded. "I am happy to help in any way I can, Mr. Pappas. Would you like me to put your sample on ice?" meaning to keep it secure and undisturbed. "Yes Tina, please do that. It is evidence for the disappearance of a domestic structure that I think will prove similar to the Hit-G disappearances."

"As you wish, Jim. It will be here if you need it, and it will be secure," she smiled and for a moment they both felt like partners in a story. "I need to do some other testing—believe it or not yours is only the first in line for today," she laughed and receded back into another part of the lab. Pappas nodded, thanked her, and went back to his car.

90

Julianna had begun attending worship services often with Sally at the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship. She drank in the love and kindness that the people there freely offered, and she appreciated Pastor Frank Moniz's messages. Then she met Maegan Grimley who attended the Southwest Evangelical Free Church. Her newfound faith was so hungry, and with every Christian that she met she somehow discovered yet another source of nurture. She was not a naïve person and she knew that sooner or later she would encounter a Christian that she did not like, but that hadn't happened yet.

She soon learned that Maegan was the governor's daughter. While that intrigued her it didn't change her initial take on the woman. Julianna quickly took to her new friend the architect. In the hall of the community building being used by Southwest EV Free, Julianna was chatting with Maegan and asked her, "Does your Mama know my cousin, who works in the capitol also?"



"What is your cousin's name?" asked Maegan.

"She goes by Heather Marcos," Julianna said.

"Yes, of course, she is a network administrator there. My mom knows her well. Is she okay? I know she was present at the attack on the capitol" Meagan inquired.

"Yes, she is well, thank you. She has been helping me get a new lifestyle going," but did not elaborate.

Maegan asked, "What do you mean goes by? Isn't that her name?"

Julianna laughed innocently. "Yes, it is, in this country. She and I are from Mexico and her name there was Maria Tomasia. Our mothers are sisters." She laughed again. "But I think Heather is a better name. Don't tell her I told you though. When we come here, from Mexico, we often take a new name." Julianna looked away. "I don't know why we do that. I never did. There I was Julianna, and here I am Julianna."

"Well, no matter," said Maegan. "Heather it is. And yes, my mother thinks very highly of your cousin." That was the extent of the conversation, but Maegan did not forget it.

Later that evening, as she was having dinner with her mother, she brought it up. "Mom, I learned something interesting today. The network administrator that you know here, Heather?" Maegan said.

"Yes, of course dear. Heather is a good worker, why do you ask?" the governor asked.

"Her cousin visited our church and I was chatting with her. Nice girl. Very pretty. But she told me that Heather isn't her real name. They are from Mexico and that Mexican immigrants sometimes take a new name when they come here."

"Yes, that is true. What is Heather's Mexican name?" Lucille asked.

"She said in Mexico, Heather's given name was Maria Tomasia." Meagan offered. "But I thought Tomasia was more of a Portuguese name?"

The governor's antenna went up and she was immediately back on full alert. She didn't want to tip off her daughter and place her in a compromised position, so she let it pass.

"Portuguese, Mexican, whatever. I guess there are lots of internationals around with home-based surnames. No matter," and took another bite of her shrimp cocktail. "Oh my, how I love shrimp" she said. "Darling, would you like a refill of your wine?"

"No Mom, I need to drive home, remember," and laughed but finished her glass. She then got up, hugged her mom, said good night, and went home to work on more drawings.

The governor entered the name Maria Tomasia into her phone. She was intrigued by this new revelation about one of her people who was growing in interest to her. Since the attack, and since she had been seen at the house in Las Campanas, Heather was, in Lucille Grimley's mind, perhaps someone with a more compelling connection.

* * * * *

Karen Asnat and Mindy McConnell could not be more different. But they each had fallen in love with men who, Mindy thought, could not be more different. The four of them had become something of a team. After the capitol attack, a new bond had formed between them. And now that each of the males had proposed marriage to each of the females, there was that common bond too. No wedding plans had been discussed by either of the couples. Since the night the men made their proposals, a kind of peace had settled in with no need for impulsive planning. The things happening around them dwarfed the things happening to them. This crossroads they had all now come through in their relationships provided what Cohen liked to affectionately call their personal DMZ, demilitarized zone. None of the four was feeling any hastiness to consummate their relationships. These volatile times needed to resolve in some way before any of them felt free to move on to the next phases of their lives.

Karen and Jim had clearly been spiritually reborn. They felt a common affection for the Bible, an intelligent but calm trust in it, not a blind loyalty but faith in its veracity.



Cohen had also softened on the subject but he seemed to be a most unlikely candidate for any kind of spiritual faith. Clearly there was something going on inside of him, but he did not speak of it much.

Mindy was the least discussion-prone about spiritual topics of the four of them, but she seemed somehow to be a catalyst with Cohen. Her role had taken on the shape of a facilitator more than a first line player. She seemed, so Karen thought, to become interested and sincerely so in spiritual conversation first, if Bob was there and second, if there was some turn in a conversation that would trigger his interest. This had happened several times, McConnell moving in a way that showed she understood and even empathized, in sync with Cohen's new sensitivity to spiritual issues.

Somehow both Jim and Karen could see that something was going on and respected the boundaries with their friends. They were paying attention and were even beginning to privately pray for Bob and Mindy. Pappas himself had not started going to any of the worship services that the Cavern Fellowships were holding and Karen continued to feel comfortable mainly with the two joined synagogues. They now met together in a rented hall. Karen attended one or the other of the two services held each Sabbath evening. There was usually an evening meal and Jim sometimes accompanied her to attend and enjoy. They sat together at such a feast on this particular Friday.

"The food at these lunches is always so good," Jim remarked, followed by Karen's response, "If there is one thing a Jew appreciates it is a fine after-service community meal. We call this an oneg." With the meal there was often singing, dancing, and even some casual Bible study, usually from Torah, fulfilling the mitzvah of enjoying Shabbat. Karen loved these and Jim enjoyed them too, although there was no mistake that he was not Jewish.

"So can I ask you something?" Jim asked. She nodded and flashed that killer smile.

"Why do all of you stay Jewish? I thought when a person comes to believe in Jesus, the past is the past," he asked.

"Yes, it is. I think that's right," she replied, not at all threatened by his question.

“It is that being Jewish is our heritage. We no longer place our hope in it though. Our hope is in *Yeshua*, in Jesus. But Jesus was Jewish and we take some pride in that. Not pride in any carnal sense. But pride as in joy. We are joyful in our Jewish Messiah. Also, Jim, there is the great continuity between the Law and the Writings and the Prophets and the whole New Testament. I see it so often when we’re reading together.”

“Did I tell you that I love you?” he asked sheepishly and kissed her hand.

“Yes, you did but you may again,” they hugged and she burned him down with that killer smile once again.

* * * * *

The Internal Revenue Service complex for the Southwest is on Washington Boulevard in Ogden, Utah, about 640 miles northwest of Santa Fe, New Mexico. One might have thought that a town the size of Santa Fe would draw little attention from the star-destroyer size of the IRS SW Area of Operation, as Mr. Francis Xappa liked to think of his employer. But Mr. Xappa had it in for the churches that had disappeared. In fact, he took offense at their martyr status in the news. He was not going to let them off the hook for their financial responsibilities to the government just because their buildings disappeared. In fact, in a closely held secret, he knew why their buildings had disappeared.

In a strange sequence of connections, he had come to know one Professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD when they were both at Caltech. Hernández was writing his dissertation when Xappa was studying quantum physics there. Although their communication was not frequent, and only done in person when the professor was in the states, their warmth for one another, fueled by what they each discovered was a mutual disgust for religious people, especially those of the evangelical flavor, always ended up with theoretical ideas on how to take down the movement.

When Professor Hernández succeeded with the super transporte technology and its placement on an Amazônia orbital platform to aim the “T” beam back to earth, it was Xappa who provided the addresses of every evangelical church in Santa Fe that he could discover. It was only happenstance that exempted the three evangelical assemblies whose buildings were untouched because Xappa did not



know about them. Xappa was informed about theology too, because he also included the two “Jesus Jew Houses,” as he called them, in the array of targets.

He was delighted that Saturday night when the super transporte simply and effortlessly took the churches out of their foundations and made them appear, very neatly together, in space at their 200-mile altitude. He was not yet aware that the professor had also transported a single-family dwelling also from Santa Fe. It floated along in the same neighborhood in space as did the twenty religious buildings.

It was at this time that Professor Hernández had booked a trip to Salt Lake City, to make a visit to the University of Utah for a conference with their environmental engineering faculty, to present a paper on “Environmental Impact Ramifications of New Development Projects in Physics,” a sleepy sounding topic and of a sufficiently general nature that he could make it all up in his sleep. Francis Xappa also booked a trip to Salt Lake City to ostensibly confer with colleagues about a new machine, learning AI endeavor for tax assessment. They booked rooms in the same hotel in downtown Salt Lake. They also sat themselves down to breakfast together in the hotel’s restaurant the next morning after their arrival. Each was proud of the elegance of their rendezvous both for breakfast and for the nightcaps they enjoyed together the night before in the professor’s suite. No e-mails had been exchanged, no text messages and no video calls. It was all done by two notes sent through the mail. No electronic footprint.

*As the two conspirators sat and enjoyed a relaxed breakfast, Screegion evilly amused itself and invisibly sat with them, mocking them. The demon pretended to be part of their conversation and every so often used his power-of-suggestion capability to inject ideas and affirmations into their dialogue.*

“Professor, since their facilities are dissolved,” *Screegion stuck the word destroyed into Xappa’s thinking,* “Or perhaps I should say destroyed,” and laughed, “Is your job complete? Now it is my show, or is there anything else that astrophysics has to offer our crusade?”

“I will have to think of more endeavors, Francis. But for the moment, their disappearance should suffice as Act 1 to their complete demise. My, how I hate them and their delusions of grandeur.*” Screegion shot an idea into the professor’s*

*subconscious.* "In fact, I should think their delusion is more than just a sad invention of an insecure and weak-minded fantasy, it is actually an evil plot to sell their snake-oil to more and more vulnerable candidates." *Screegion clapped his claws together in black delight.*

"Yes, João, evil they are," Xappa reflected. "And I am making every attempt to demolish their continuance as viable, government-coddled organizations, even while they still pitifully meet." He paused, thinking, "But I am afraid that their numbers—as the media reports—are rising a little, even though they are bereft of their own facilities. But I do not think that this will last long."

The professor sipped his latte and remarked, "We have Spt-bammed the safe house into orbit too. There is no evidence at all left of our commercial endeavor. We need to use the super transporte wisely and not too often, I think. But with Julio and Sergio dead, we are only left with Ms. Marcos as a local representative of our august fellowship." And he laughed at his own eloquence.

Hernández continued. "I am confident that her cover remains intact." He smacked his lips. "She has not contacted me since the failed delivery of product to the capitol. It is a shame that the delivery failed. But there is always more product and the Americans provide an ever-insatiable market. You have arranged for the next shipment, yes?"

"I have indeed," answered Xappa. "It will arrive shortly and our cash flow will resume before too long. That is the least of our concerns." *Screegion flicked another thought into the IRS agent's mind.* "The stupid religious fanatics are surprisingly resilient though. When they meet for these prayer meetings, somehow, they are shielded from our surveillance. They pray and it generates some kind of bizarre protection. I do not understand this, except that I know that it is real. We would do well to find ways to inhibit this effort."

*At that point, Screegion evaporated. Something had unnerved it. It was the Archas who had arrived in the hotel restaurant, almost as if summoned.*

"Yes indeed, Francis, we should—to use a nuclear power term—scram their silly prayer efforts." He chuckled and said, "I will think on this." The two finished their last morsels of breakfast and went their ways.



*The Archas watched, unemotional, smugly satisfied. The unholy alliance was functioning properly.*

91

Rosaria Moniz and Sophia Menendez and several others continued praying together twice a week. They were praying for the whole city of Santa Fe, all the main playbill participants in this curious drama; the governor, her co-workers that they knew about, the police, the two media persons (Cohen and McConnell), Pappas and Asnat (who had announced their engagement), the network of dischurched sister churches, and even the unnamed enemies from *Demônios Elevados.*

They did not know to pray for Julianna or for Heather, specifically. But the conviction of being in God's will was there, in the focus in which they were led, when prayer felt both coldly counterintuitive and warmly right. Who prays for their enemies, especially ruthless ones? And who doesn't already pray for their friends? Somehow it felt like hard work but it also felt important. They did not know why, but to know that they were praying sincerely and with an earnestness that was beyond their normal pace, even as pastor's wives, made it feel like God was honored in their approach to Him, and that He would use their efforts.

* * * * *

Governor Grimley, Avon Duvall, and Jim Pappas still mused over what they had seen in the Free Church hole. L-I-G-H-T was clearly an allusion to the letter that Karen Asnat had received. The governor had not been brought into this detail, but they still all knew what they had seen. It was no hallucination, and there didn't seem to be any appreciable advantage of telling the governor about the angelic letters. Her daughter, on the other hand . . .

* * * *

A Brazilian Air Force, *Força Aérea Brasileira,* Saab JAS39E Gripen jet fighter was overflying the capital city of Brasilia on what to anyone would have appeared to be

a routine flight. The aircraft was an E-unit, with updated electronics and radar. Its international sales had paled compared to the American Lockheed-Martin F-16s and F-35s and even second-hand French Dassaults. But Brazil liked this aircraft and was planning on acquiring a new order of the Saab soon. The pilot was tracking an Amazônia satellite with his ULAR, upward-looking atmospheric radar. He was intrigued with the readings the satellite was sending as he flew into clouds.

The satellite seemed to be painting his own aircraft with a strange signal of some kind which reminded him of what a pilot would detect just before he was hit by a SAM, surface to air missile. Before he could radio his report, a blue beam came out of nowhere and neatly excised his right wingtip, as if it were deliberately dismembering his Saab. He kept his nerve and radioed a Mayday, *Socorro,* and pulled the seat ejector lever. The canopy flew off and out he went, but upside down because the jet had flipped over at the loss of the wingtip. His chute came out and though stunned, he watched what happened next to his aircraft. A blue beam seemed to hit it and immediately the jet vanished. One moment the pilot could hear his plane groaning as it died, and the next all he could hear was the sound of wind as he descended under his parachute towards Lago Paranoá—the artificial lake in the middle of the city.

Alone in his office in São Paulo, Professor Hernandez had neatly choreographed the event, all from his iPad. He was amazed at himself and the casual and effortless way he had performed this surgery and reassignment of the Saab fighter. He was also very proud of himself for his noble *exercício* of mercy in allowing the pilot to eject rather than to experience an unwanted space flight. To add to the art of the moment, the operation was accompanied on his desk by a wonderful cup of Brazil's finest coffee. The satellite platform was equipped with a high-precision Linear



Imaging Self-Scanning sensor camera so the professor could actually watch where the Spt-BAM was targeted. He had slightly repositioned the Amazônia bird with its two very elegant retrorockets, then aimed the split-focused beam array and sent two bursts, one after the other at the Saab. He needed no co-pilot to assist.

The second beam, in an instant, transported the jet into a pre-set coordinate, aft of the Hit-G church structures. Aft was really a misnomer since space has no up, down, side, or front-to-rear spatialization. The aircraft would not last long—the various cannisters and reservoirs of service gases and oxygen would burst and blow the Saab's sides out soon, in zero gravity. No matter—no one would miss it since no one would know where it went. Hernandez looked at the tiny window labelled POWER CONSUMPTION on the iPad's display of the Flight Status page for the Amazônia. The power consumption curve had dipped at the two usages of the Spt-BAM. Then, due to the very efficient solar panels that powered the platform, the curve flattened nicely. On that Saturday evening when he had Spt-Bammed twenty buildings into space, the curve had dipped considerably and it took a full fifteen minutes for the power matrix to re-stabilize.

But there the jet fighter floated, sans its starboard wingtip, which had fallen into Lago Paranoá. The wingtip reached the water first, as the pilot observed, and he hit the water a couple of moments later.

Brazilian Air Force pilot Capitão Breno Lucas was uninjured as he splashed down. He waited to be fished out of the lake by chopper, which took little time, and he immediately reported to his CO. After his debrief he commented, "Sir, I saw where my wingtip hit the water. Should we try to retrieve it? It might yield a clue as to what that beam was."

"Good idea, Captain. See to it," was the reply he received. The commanding officer didn't mention the loss of an $85 million Saab JAS39E aircraft. He was glad his pilot was okay. He had seen the brief bursts of some kind of beam and was curious as to the reason for the crash. But Capitão Lucas seemed intent to investigate the happening on his own, initially, and the commander appreciated initiative.

* * * * *

Capitão Lucas collected a small team of *Guarda Costeira* personnel including two divers. In their launch the pilot took them to about where he felt the wingtip had

splashed in. The lake was not deep at this point and it only took the two divers about fifteen minutes until they surfaced, each holding a side of the wingtip. It was hauled into a second launch and transported to an Air Force hangar at the Brasilia Air Base where Capitão Lucas oversaw its examination by a couple of friends who were aeronautical engineers. They each detected the effects of the blue beam that the pilot testified had sawed off the wingtip. A couple of tests revealed burning, as one might expect from a laser cut but there was something more. The severed edge, though briefly immersed in lake water, exhibited something called plasmatized restructuring, a relatively new field of study among Brazilian physicists. It gave readings that at first seemed to indicate unknown chemical compounds in a beamed wave form. But these two engineers were aware of *reestruturação plasmatizada* and told the pilot that this, in fact, was what appeared to have occurred to his wing—*muito sexy,* they said, and laughed.

They could not speculate from where the beam had originated, but one of them remembered reading an article some months before about a strange disappearance of twenty churches in the United States where soil residue was toxic and included traces of unknown elements—the tell-tale sign of *reestruturação plasmatizada.* He remembered seeing news reports of strange happenings near where his friend Bruce Philipsburg lived. Bruce flew helicopters and Lucas flew jets, but their aviation camaraderie merited at least a phone call.

The pilot reported the preliminary theory to his CO and requested permission to place a call, on a secure line, to his friend in the United States Air Force, Captain Bruce Philipsburg. The CO requisitioned a fast-track security check on the captain, and got back to Lucas in three hours, granting permission for a consultation call. Lucas texted the captain and set a call up for the next day.

* * * * *

“Olá, Lieutenant Philipsburg,” opened Lucas.

“Good morning, Captain Lucas. Good to hear from you, but I am now a captain also,” replied Philipsburg.

“Congratulations, my friend. And are you still flying?” Lucas said.

“I am, yes. I am full-time now and flying recon. And you? Are you still flying Phantoms?” and the American laughed.



“I am now flying Saabs, Captain. And that is why I wanted to talk to you. I was shot down over Brasilia last week.” He waited a few seconds for the startling news to sink in. “It was some sort of beam from space that clipped my starboard wingtip, I ejected, and then the whole plane disappeared. It seemed very deliberate to me,” explained Lucas.

Philipsburg was very interested and told the Brazilian pilot, “That is something, Breno. Tell me more.”

Lucas went on, “We retrieved the wingtip from *Lago* . . . the lake here in town, and I had two engineers do an analysis of the severed edge. They discerned something in physics that we call *reestruturação plasmatizada*—you call it plasmatized restructuring. But no one seems very interested in what happened to the rest of my beautiful Saab.”

“Yes, indeed, Breno. That is what we are finding was used in the disappearance of the churches here. Specifically, churches and two synagogues. There must be a connection,” the American pilot said.

“Bruce,” Lucas went on with more, and more quietly, “there is a Brazilian professor that I know of in São Paulo that is known to have worked on this technology. I have not seen him in our news lately, but I think perhaps I will look into him, yes?”

“Be careful, my friend. If there is a connection between us and you in this technology, they might be very concerned with being investigated,” Philipsburg said, not preachy, but seriously. “There might be more than meets the eye, going on here.”

“Yes, Captain. You are right. And I am so glad to talk to you today. When I am next in the States, we must meet and I will bring you some *primeira* coffee,” Lucas finished.

“I will look forward to that, sir. Roger, and out,” Philipsburg concluded, feeling ridiculous for using a radio term on a cell phone.

* * * * *

The governor had been casually admiring the two Impressionist masterpieces. Their stay in the capitol had been granted an extension of a month, since the attack, as a

courtesy on behalf of their owners and in realization that the attack had nothing to do with the paintings themselves or their value. It was a noble expression of confidence and respect to the State of New Mexico to offer their display for a while longer. The governor greatly appreciated the gesture and therefore made it a point to stop by their display as often as possible. This day, she stood there looking at the lady and the night scene. She was, as usual, overwatched by Bill and Carlos, who seemed tireless in their devotion to her. This was a thing she also greatly appreciated.

Bill stood near her, while Carl stayed in the shadows. She said to her aide, "These are really amazing. And even more amazing is how they were used so crudely as a cover for nothing loftier than marketing fentanyl."

"Yes ma'am, it is so crude," said Bill.

"The way these artists used light," then she stopped, and thought, *L-I-G-H-T, the hole was flashing that signal*. She didn't say any of this out loud, and Bill would not have known what she was speaking of anyway.

"Back upstairs," and she headed back to her office. The aide motioned to his partner and they were all soon back to their workstations.

* * * * *

The *Força Aérea Brasileira* jet pilot took three days of vacation and flew commercial down to São Paulo. It was a two-hour flight and he checked into a hotel near the university, not wearing his uniform. In his mind, the mission was simple. Discover as much as he could in two days about Professor João Manuel Hernandez.

He received a personal endorsement to do so by none other than the Base Commander who apparently did care about losing an 439,322,500 Real aircraft, especially since all he had to show for it was a two-foot by three-foot wingtip fragment.

"Yes, Capitão, please use this time carefully and wisely. I have had suspicions about that department of the university for some time. Bring me what you can, but do not get caught," the commander said.



Lucas' confidence buoyed. He had one inroad to make use of. His nephew was an air cadet in the Brazilian equivalent of Air Force ROTC and a triple major in physics, astrophysics, and math. Lucas knew he had to be careful. He was close to his nephew, and they met in an off-the-beaten-path café, one that was popular with students but relatively unknown to higher ups.

Lucas's nephew, Cadet André Ferreira, was a twenty-one-year-old senior. He loved airplanes and he loved physics. He was hoping for a great career in astronautics and the fact that his nation now had its own satellites, that excited him.

The two men purchased their coffee and sat down outside the café. They were fond of each other and Lucas began, "So, my brilliant *sobrinho*, how are your studies progressing?" he asked, innocently enough.

"They are going well. This semester, I am enjoying and loving Optics. Plus, I am taking Solid State Physics and also Advanced Methods in Astrophysics. That one puts me close to Professor Hernandez. Have you heard of him," André asked?

"Of course. Who hasn't? In fact, after my crash," Lucas replied with feigned animation, "I wondered if, well, I don't know . . ."

André was no dummy and he had heard that his uncle had lost a plane, but he knew nothing more. He offered, "Let me show you something, uncle. Come with me." They covered their coffees and took them with them. André said, "It's not far. My building is just up the street." They walked to a large, modern building named *Edifício de Física,* Physics Building. They took the elevator to the third floor where the doors opened to a gallery of displays. So beautifully designed that it looked like a museum as much as anything. André took his uncle through a first gallery and to a second. There in front of the pilot and his nephew, opened a fantastic display along one whole wall of something labelled "REESTRUTURAÇÃO PLASMATIZADA."

"André, what is this?" asked Lucas, acting ignorant.

"This, Uncle Breno, is what we are all so proud of," said the younger cadet, with great flair. "This is the *mais novo dos novos* technology and our faculty is very excited about it. This is the newest physics perhaps in the whole world. It's not actually secret. You saw a public display, didn't you?" he laughed. "The idea that by

enveloping an object in this special kind of beam, it can be transported whole to another location."

Lucas' eyebrow raised, and he put his hand on his head. "A transporter?" he asked, surprised.

"The physics for such a thing, yes." He explained as much as a layman might understand. Lucas acted fascinated, mesmerized, which of course he was. But he carried off the demeanor of a new student, captured by the glamor of such brand-new knowledge. And his nephew was more than willing to give him a full dose of the wonder of plasmatized restructuring. "The cool thing is that in space, the effect of restructuring is that things look as though they are composed of actual new elements, whose atomic weights would be higher—heavier—than anything so far discovered. They would also be incredibly radioactive, which is what would power a beam of such strength." He smiled, heartened at the ability to impress his pilot uncle. Then he stopped and turned to look at his uncle.

"Tio, what did happen to your aircraft?" he asked.

Lucas had to think fast and speak carefully, so he decided to offer some candor. "Actually, André, I do not know. I was flying a routine recon patrol, and out of the sky—the atmosphere I should say—some kind of force came around my aircraft, after first cutting off my wingtip. I radioed a Mayday and ejected. I landed in the Lago, and I don't know what became of my Saab—and no one has told me yet." He left out the part about scanning upward into space with his radar.

The young air cadet was pensive, silent. He looked at his uncle, then around the gallery. They were alone. Lucas felt an urgent, uncanny need to get out of there so he headed to the elevator. When André's back was turned, he surreptitiously aimed his phone at the *Plasmatizada* display and grabbed a burst of several pictures. As they got into the elevator, he thanked his nephew for the short tour. As they were leaving the building, André spied Professor Hernandez across the courtyard. "Would you like to meet Professor Hernandez, uncle?" he asked.

Lucas smiled and said sheepishly, "No André, that would be too embarrassing for me to meet such a famous scientist. I would become a little boy again—no, thank you, not today."



André laughed and said, "Fine, I understand. Those fellows can be intimidating," but not buying his uncle's ruse for a minute. Something was up, he decided at that point. And he was not wrong. Something was up, and it was Brazil's newest Saab JAS39E Gripen jet fighter, about two hundred miles up.

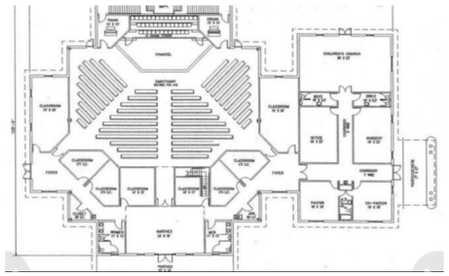
92

In one of the strangest and also jubilant days of her life, Maegan Grimley, architect, completed the mammoth project of her career. She had finished all the requisite drawing sets for nineteen buildings. She had printed the vellum sets of designs, paying for the printing herself, bound them together as architects usually do, in a roll. Each fellowship had their drawings then rolled into a very nice presentation tube, with plastic protection sheets for each drawing, and the tubes even had a shoulder strap. Each set began with a gorgeous full color perspective rendition of their theoretical new facility.

The day was momentous for her, not only because she felt a great sense of finality, and she was exhausted by that, but she felt like she had done something spiritual. She had told no one other than her mother that she was doing this. Her normal work did not suffer. In fact, a senior partner in her firm complemented her on her normal assignment of commercial work. She felt like the children of Israel when their sandals did not wear out.

Each facility was different, some small and some a bit larger, uniquely designed for what she knew about each fellowship. In her head she only merged the two synagogues. All other churches remained distinct though she knew of at least temporary mergers and collaborations since the Hit-G phenomena. She had not forgotten The Drawing, and had visited it a couple of times, still in the Monizes' safe keeping. Each time she visited it, it seemed to have changed in very subtle ways. She was not alarmed at that and reacted almost as if that was expected. She didn't know why, and she rolled with it. Each visit left her refreshed and even joyful.

Now, she wanted to present each drawing tube, to each pastor personally, as a gift, with no expectations. She called her mother, and asked if she could come by the governor's residence that evening? Her mother had no events scheduled and said, "Yes darling, of course. Why, is something up?"



"Yes, Mom, I have something wonderful to show you. I'll come by after supper if that's okay?" she asked.

"Yes, that is fine. I'm so curious! What does my daughter have to show me?" the governor said.

"See you after supper, Mom," and she clicked off.

* * * * *

Maegan parked her car, opened the hatch and Lucille could see that it was full of tubes of some kind. Her daughter grabbed as big a bundle of them as she could and carried them past her mother, who was standing there in some surprise. Maegan seemed effervescent. She smiled, hugged her mother, sat her down at the table and sat down herself.

She blew out a long breath and sighed, still smiling. "It's done, Mom," looking at the pile of black vinyl, leather-looking tubes.



"What's done, dear?" Lucille said, calmly, like June Cleaver might have sounded in that early 1960s television series.

"Darling, I am stunned. These are magnificent. Have the pastors seen them yet," asked her mom?

"That is my next mission, Mom," she replied. "I am going to present each tube to each pastor. I really and truly have no expectations of them. I want them to all have some hope!"

"You really are a godly young woman, dear," her mother said, quietly.

"No Mom, I am not." She hesitated for a moment. "No, really, a Christian should never self-assess as godly. I am a sinner, saved by grace. Period," and that is all she intended to say.

"You did not self-assess, dear, I assessed you," and she laughed. "You have done something magnificent, brilliant, and I would be willing to bet no one has ever done something like this—without commission—since Michelangelo. And he probably did very little *gratis* work." And then they both laughed. They looked at some more of the plans, and the governor was astounded at her daughter's creativity, energy and love that blazed off of each vellum plate. Some were in color—even some of the more technical, construction drawings which normally are never in color. Obviously, Maegan wanted to produce something unusual for each fellowship.

"Even if nothing is ever built, I wanted to bless the fellowships. I could do it, no one else was going to do it, so I felt like I should do it," she told her mother. "And then, I wanted to do it. It felt . . . that God had called me to do this," and she averted her mother's gaze and looked at the floor.

The governor was even more amazed at this explanation. She had tears in her eyes, a rare thing for such a powerful and self-reliant person. She looked at her daughter, looked at the tubes, and then moved in to hug her. They both had become very tearful. "Darling," Lucille said, "You know I am not religious. But if anything was going to compel me to look into religion, this would be it," and she laughed.

The two of them continued their visit over tea for two hours. Maegan clearly delighted in sharing details, drawing by drawing, with her mother. Lucille had never before felt so proud, and her amazement did not fade.

There was then a lull, both women being tired. But Lucille was not through. She looked at her daughter and said, “So daughter, tell me about this faith of yours.”

Maegan did not immediately react. Then she began.

“Mom, you raised me to value hard work, expression, to search out my deepest dreams. I remember you said, when I was around fifteen, ‘Maegan, use that brain of yours. God didn’t give it to you to waste.’ So, I have. I have done all the things you raised me to do, and I could not have wished for a better Momma,” a title she rarely used.

“But Mom, there was still a hole inside of me, a void in my heart. Achievement, recognition, even architecture did not fill the void. I knew there must be more. I could not escape the sense that somehow, I was broken. There was a blackness in my heart that nothing could make go away. I couldn’t blame it on anyone else. I couldn’t blame it on my parents, on society, or on anything else. It was like a built-in fault line about to crack open. Do you remember what I was reading when I was in college? I read Nietzsche, Sartre, Freud, Russell, all those guys. And I read lots of feminists too, but all of them together were just arguing with each other. They were smart, sure. They had insights, yes. But they were all tortured in one way or another. And dark. Understand?”

Lucille had a dark look on her face, but she didn’t give it verbal expression. She answered, “I’m trying, dear.”

“But then, I met Guinevere, Gwen. You’ve met her. She is Pastor Charlie’s wife. I met her at Walmart, in the dressing room.”

Now her mom laughed, “You buy your clothes at Walmart?”

Maegan laughed again, “I did sometimes, then. Anyway, I was trying on some things and this lady was doing the same. She was friendly to me, but not in a creepy way.



She seemed naturally friendly. Don’t misunderstand. She had no agenda. She wasn’t being friendly to try to get me to go to her church or anything like that.”

The governor frowned, “No?” she said.

Maegan smiled. “No. Not at all. She was kind, that’s all, with an unpretentious way about her. I was immediately drawn to that.” It was late, and she yawned. “I’m sorry Mom, I’m going on and on and I’m sure you’re tired.”

“No, no. Tell me some more, please,” Lucille asked.

“Gwen asked me if I wanted to get some coffee, so we went to Alamos Brew and sat together. She told me her own story, and then how she had come to believe in Jesus. It wasn’t an easy thing for her and so I listened. We parted ways and she left it at that. She did tell me her husband was a pastor of some church, which I thought was kind of interesting. She didn’t press me for personal information, didn’t dig around inside of me looking for a hole. Anyway, Mom, she gave me a Bible—not pushy in any way, just gave me a Bible. I still have it. I read in the Gospels about Jesus. I couldn’t read enough. Jesus was amazing! And one night, I woke up and realized, I believe in Him.”

Lucille was silent. And then that became awkward and Maegan got up to leave. She rolled the drawings back into their tubes and her mother helped her carry them out to her car. “Daughter, you know I love you more than anything,” she said. Maegan looked at her, hugged her and said, “I know you do, Mom. I know you do. I’ll call you tomorrow. Thanks for letting me talk.” The governor smiled and waved goodbye as her daughter drove off. Carlos flashed his flashlight twice, from the entrance drive letting her know all was well. The governor went to bed with a quiet happiness like she had not known since she couldn’t remember when.

93

From the beginning, Governor Grimley did not understand why the IRS had sent the ominous letters to the Hit-G churches, threatening revocation of whatever status of taxation exemption they had previously enjoyed. This seemed so very wrong but she also knew that first, getting answers from Ogden was unlikely, and second, that attempting to use her state government leadership was likely to bring

trouble down on her administration. She decided to try to quietly investigate what was going on using internal assets.

Since the capitol attack, her attentions had been focused on a wider sense of danger but now things had quieted down. She called a meeting with her most trusted people, a strange brew to be sure. These included Jim Pappas, Bob Cohen, Trooper Avon Duvall, Bill and Carlos, and network administrator Heather Marcos. She sent them all a request to be in her office early on a Monday morning. They each indicated that they would be there. None of these were personally involved with any of the churches and, except for Mr. Cohen, all were state employees. She added Cohen to her invite list because she had learned of his savviness, his vigilance, and his former service to the country. She also thought it might be wise to have an embedded newsman in the room.

In the meeting, Ms. Marcos sat next to the governor, Pappas and Cohen and Duvall sat elsewhere around the table, and Bill and Carlos sat near the door. When Cohen and Duvall each saw Marcos, they were instantly on alert but also careful not to show it. So far as they knew, Heather Marcos was still an unknown *Demônios* operative with access to the governor. Duvall had clued Bill and Carlos in earlier but asked them not to tip their hand. The state trooper made a case for keeping the woman under surveillance at all times, since she might be a lead to other gang operatives. No one knew, including Ms. Marcos herself, that the Brazilian physics professor was a *Demônios* kingpin and linked into the Francis Xappa-IRS plot to ruin or extinguish the Hit-G churches. She also was unaware of anything about Mr. Francis Xappa.

“Thank you all for being with me today. This is something of an unusual investigation I have been working on. But as governor, I think my responsibilities include the protection of a sizable community of citizens who seem to have come under an unjust and unreasonable scrutiny which appears to me at least to be without precedent in the history of our state.”

Ms. Marcos yawned. Cohen noticed but did not look at her. The governor continued. “As you are all among my most trusted fellow servants, I wish to see what we can learn together, as an unofficial task force, if you will, through whatever resources we may have at our disposal, why the Southwest Center office of the Internal Revenue Service decided to focus what appears to be a retributive or even



a punitive campaign against the churches and synagogues in our city after the disappearance of their buildings last year. Each of you possesses your own unique skills and assets. I wish to bring them all together to learn what has happened, who is behind it and what their ultimate goals are in focusing on these churches. You have all seen the original e-mail that was sent to the pastors—in itself an inappropriate misstep, since pastors are rarely if ever the CEOs or CFOs of their churches. Perhaps most absurdly is the threat of even invoking EPA penalties upon these groups. The e-mail comes from a Mr. Francis Xappa, who is listed as Supervisory Revenue Officer for the IRS Southwest Center. And let me say, that since any hours you contribute to this effort will be off-duty from your regular jobs—except you, Mr. Cohen—I will figure out an appropriate way to compensate you from an auxiliary service account I have at my disposal. We will work out the details of that which will all be legal.” They all laughed and she went on. “You have the original e-mail in front of you, and I want you to know that at this point I am unaware of any further actions taken by the IRS against these churches—something more may be brewing but I am unaware of it.”

“Madam Governor, a question,” asked Pappas. She nodded. “What exactly are we looking for on this fellow, or any other agents that work for him?”

“I think we begin by carefully looking into the man himself, with whatever we can learn, and study his methods of carrying out his normal job. Are there any anomalous tactics that we can find, any questionable associations, which are not generally used with 601e4 non-profits? Has he broken any laws or even basic protocols? What can we learn? Of course, as you all are painfully aware, the IRS is a federal organization and that, officially, is out of our jurisdiction. We also need to guard against violating the man’s civil rights as well as those of people around him. But here in New Mexico, these are my citizens, and I will not have them rough-handled or abused especially in the situation they have all been plunged into. Yes, we have other problem areas in the State of New Mexico, I know. Education, a huge increase in the number of undocumented immigrants, and of course, the *Demônios Elevados.”* Heather’s ankle twitched at that remark, though her face did not change. This time Pappas noticed it.

Duvall spoke, “Madam Governor, I hope this is not out of line for me to ask, but it seems relevant—are you in regular touch with any of the people or pastors of these churches?”

“Not at all, Officer, yes that is an appropriate question. I can say that my daughter is a part of one of the churches, and I have met a few of the pastors. After the Christmas Eve attack, I have become friends with the Monizes and the Menendezes. They have been most gracious, even with all their troubles. You will remember, Mr. Cohen, that Sophie Menendez was shot on that sad evening. Also, I believe that Captain Philipsburg and his wife attend the church that my daughter goes too.”

“I remember all too well, Madam Governor,” Cohen replied.

Heather thought she would seize some momentum and therefore shield herself, somehow. She said, “So what can I do to help?”

“Yes, Heather, since you are the most computer savvy, and perhaps have some tricks up your sleeve—speaking of which, that is a lovely blouse,” and they all laughed, “Perhaps you can look into Mr. Xappa, his communications, without him knowing of course.”

“I would be delighted, ma’am,” Heather said, and she meant it.

“Mr. Pappas, perhaps you might have contacts in Ogden that could assist in sniffing out anything around that office or its personnel,” the governor said.

“Yes ma’am, I can inquire, and I will be stealthy,” Pappas answered.

“That leaves you, Officer Duvall. Perhaps it is you who must be most careful, since crossing wires between New Mexico State Police and the IRS might be construed as a conflict of jurisdiction in the most dramatic sense. You must be careful, and you understand I hope, that I am not ordering you into this inquiry,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am. I understand. I shall be very circumspect, and I understand, obviously, that the keeping of the laws of the State of New Mexico are our highest priority. I am your servant, Madam Governor.”

Cohen snorted, then cleared his throat.



“Okay then, my friends, good luck, be wise, and we shall reconvene in two weeks,” the governor said, then walked to her office. Heather went to her office immediately, and the others headed to the elevator.

In the elevator, Cohen said to Duvall and Pappas, “I feel like it is time for the governor to be brought in on . . .” Pappas shook his head violently and glanced upwards. Cohen got quiet, but then went on “. . . Ms. McConnell’s wedding plans.”

As they exited the elevator, walked past the art displays and out to the street, Cohen said, “Good save, Jim. I forgot that one doesn’t know what surveillance apparatus might be in use in an elevator like that,”

“Or who is listening,” said Pappas.

Cohen took up the real subject again. “As I was going to say, Ms. Marcos’ little secret.”

Duvall said, “Yes, I think so too. But we need to do this carefully. But the time has come, do you agree Avon?”

“I think so,” the trooper said. “We pass a point of diminishing returns to keep it from her any longer. Now that we’re unofficially officially on a task force together we can watch her more closely. And yes, the governor needs to be in on what we know. But I hope we don’t spook Heather, as her connections might be more valuable now than ever.”

“I can speak to her more naturally, I think, in the capitol, without seeming out of place,” Pappas offered.

“Sounds good,” Duvall said, and the three parted ways on the plaza, near where there had once hung an ostentatious piece of sculpture. Until it was blown away by an RPG.

* * * * *

It had been a careful piece of skullduggery, for the *Demônios* leadership to partition off their various cells from one another, all while integrating them into the single

mission of the gang—to make piles of money off an American drug market that was endlessly hungry. Among the top leadership was the Brazilian professor of physics and the American Supervisory Revenue officer. Late of that guild was also the scholar of art, Julio Hernandez. His cousin, also the late Sergio Sánchez, was not in the elite leadership team and nor was his girlfriend, Maria Tomasia a.k.a. Heather Marcos, although her placement within the capitol had served the gang well. Now she was flapping in the breeze, the professor noted to himself. Her contacts in the gang, as useful as she had been, were limited to Julio and Sergio. And now they were gone. “But we must not squander this asset,” Professor Hernández had mentioned to Mr. Xappa during their recent breakfast in Ogden. “Perhaps it is time to educate her some more.”

The professor’s great passion for physics, and his great accomplishment, now floating in orbit and proving itself wonderfully, were bringing him more joy than ever. “That fighter jet had no business snooping where it was not invited,” the professor said to himself. He laughed, “But now that beautiful aircraft is flying cover for twenty churches and one lovely private residence.” Soon all would lose altitude, crumble, and burn up in the atmosphere piece by piece.

“I think it is time for me to make another visit to the great United States,” he mumbled and asked his secretary to book him a flight to Utah, where he would once again speak with his good friend, Mr. Xappa. Perhaps they could invite Ms. Marcos to join them for a lovely dinner meeting.

* * * * *

Simultaneous to these meditations of the professor, Heather Marcos had begun her online stealth investigation of Mr. Xappa. Little did she know that soon she would dine with both the focus of her investigation, the great physicist and the main perpetrator of the disappearance of the Hit-G churches.

94

Julianna Namara had continued to transition away from her professional proclivities and more towards a new lifestyle. Less and less, did she talk to her cousin Maria, and more and more she gravitated towards Sally and her fellow church members. Julianna still felt out of place in a church family, but the degree



of kindness and patience that the church people showed was hard for her to deny. Some knew of her former line of work but it was as if it didn’t matter. Maria had written her a check for a thousand dollars and given it to her the last time they had lunch. Sally had found her a job in a fashion clothes store in the mall, a thing which Julianna was really starting to enjoy. It didn’t pay anywhere near what she had been accustomed to earning, but it was clean money, and she was making it financially. She was proud of herself and feeding on the strength she felt by being among this new community, a church.

She was attending Santa Fe Christian Assembly, listening to Pastor Victor Moniz, making friends in which was now one of several mobile fellowships. They would meet in one place for a while and then an announcement would be made of a new place to meet. That pattern would repeat itself regularly. There was a sense of staying beneath the radar as much as possible. Julianna had no problem with that, as long as she knew where the church was meeting the following week. Sally and Rosaria made sure to keep her up to date.

By this time, the pastors had all received their gifts of drawings from Maegan Grimley, and all were profoundly appreciative. Rosaria and Victor still possessed The Drawing that they had placed in Maegan’s possession. For that reason, Rosaria felt a special bond with Ms. Grimley. And the thought occurred to her, *perhaps Julianna might benefit with an introduction to this marvelous young architect.* It was a random thought, and maybe might not work at all. But who knows? So, she set up a coffee date, and both women were more than happy to attend. The place, where else? Alamos Brew.

* * * * *

Mindy McConnell had fallen deeply in love with her rough-edged newshound, former Navy SEAL. It was that simple. She might as well give in full tilt, as Bob liked to say. She had not slept with him. She probably would have done so, but something had come over her fiancé. He had become very traditional. He kissed her hotly and passionately enough, but put the brakes on with anything else. She found that kind of charming, endearing even. Strangely she felt respected and thought, *I could get used to that.* As they sat in his RV on this particular evening, beers were the general libation.

“Chief, when are you going to marry me?” she blurted out.

“Shit! Excuse me, damn, girl . . . excuse me. Holy Moses woman, I’m getting there!” he said. And he gave her a side glance. Man, how he had fallen in love with this pistol-toting veteran news agent. “Let me let you in on something love . . . you have earned your stripes.”

Mindy’s eyebrow went up, and she said, “Little ol’ *moi*?”

“Yes. I am involved with something new at the moment. Just broke. It’s more than Santa Fe Day research. When this is done, if we all survive,” and he laughed, “then I want to marry you. I want to do it as soon as this is over. I’m not getting any younger, and I need a new RV.”

Mindy snorted her mouth of beer, and dribbled it down her sweatshirt, which made him laugh so hard he fell right out of his chair. She ran and fell on top of him and kissed him so hard, he belched very loudly. “Gawd what a pig!” she said and kissed him again. This was her man.

But he told her about the meeting with the governor, and who was involved. She understood that the goal was nothing less than the defeat of the scourge of *Demônios Elevados.* Bob Cohen trusted Mindy McConnell more than anyone on the planet these days and perhaps she might have an insight as this mission unfolded.

* * * * *

Rosaria Moniz arrived first at Alamos Brew and got herself a small, iced coffee. Next Julianna walked in, and Rosaria thought to herself, s*he is stunning.* Julianna was not dressed in any kind of an elegant way and certainly not in the manner of her former profession. She was a beautiful young woman, now with a grace and inner glow that was noticeable. She sat down with Rosaria who offered to purchase a beverage for her. She accepted and Rosaria bought her latte. She seemed relaxed, at peace. Maegan arrived last and purchased a small hot coffee. After introductions and comments about the weather Rosaria plunged in.



“Julianna, I am so excited about how the Lord is working in your life. And I wanted you to meet Maegan, someone else that God is using.” Maegan blushed and looked at the floor. Rosaria went on.

“Maegan is an architect, a really good one, and she recently prepared complete plans for each of the churches that lost their buildings. None of us know what we’re going to do with them yet,” and she laughed. Maegan shrugged.

Julianna was listening intently. She asked, “Why did you do that, Maegan? It must have taken a great deal of time.”

Maegan had the answer ready, because she had frequently been asked the same question, not the least by her mother. “I don’t know,” she mused. “I think I felt like I was supposed to do it, and actually I got a tremendous amount of joy by working on them. To be honest, I’m kind of sad to be finished.”

“Wow,” Julianna said. “That’s really something. I wish I had a—what would you call it—a mission or something like that. I’ve been *perdida,* um, lost, since coming to this country.”

“But you have some new hope now, yes?” asked Rosaria.

“I don’t know, do I?” asked Julianna. “When I first started going to church everyone was so nice and it didn’t seem to matter where I had been, or what I had done. That has not changed. But now I am restless and I want to find a new life. But I know so few people and I have no—how do you say—skills that are marketable, or honorable.”

Maegan asked her, “Julianna, what do you like to do? I mean, what would you do all the time if you could? And earn a living at it, I mean.”

The younger woman thought. “I think I would like to decorate home interiors. My *madre* back in Mexico loved to do that and I found pleasure watching her look through catalogs and draw ideas on paper. In fact, I have one here in my bag.” She pulled out an old, folded up piece of paper and unfolded it for the two women to see.

It was what appeared to be a living room, hand-sketched, with colored carpet, paintings on the walls, brightly colored upholstered furniture, lamps, and a lovely sense of sunlight coming in. It really was an excellent concept piece, Maegan thought. At that moment, she pulled out a business card and gave it to the younger woman. Rosaria tried not to smile too obviously.

“That is what I would do all the time, and into the night, if I could. But I know it takes schooling and of that I have none,” Julianna said matter-of-factly.

The conversation went on for a while. Maegan shared some of her story with Julianna, and Rosaria gave some details of her own story, and Julianna learned who Maegan’s *madre* was. It was a warm meeting, and when they finished, each had a sense of joy that somehow this was not wasted time.

* * * * *

Two things were happening at the same time.

The professor was manipulating the “T” platform on his iPad. He was alone in his office. He was perpetually amazed and proud that he could so cleverly maintain two personas almost simultaneously. On one hand, he was the respected, revered, and renowned physicist, senior professor at a major world-class university. On the other hand, he was senior leader of a completely despicable drug gang and personally enlivened by his hatred of American Christians, and Jewry too for that matter.

The *second thing* happening was a routine flight in a Sikorsky HH-60 Pave Hawk USAF helicopter by Captain Bruce Philipsburg.

The professor was watching him, imagining some mischief. He could not know of course that it was Philipsburg doing the piloting. He aimed the “T” at the chopper and fired off a burst by touching a button on his iPad: *ENVOLVER* - engage.

*Neither man knew that the chopper had an invisible wingman, or rather an angel of God. Kuriosagapa matched speed with the chopper as he generally did when the captain was aloft. The angel discerned the approaching beam, as angels’ sense of motion and time are not limited to general physics of the created third dimension.*



*He simply put up his hand and deflected the beam almost as if it was glancing off a plane of glass. It broke its line and angled off to the right at a forty-five-degree angle.*

The pilot saw a beam go past him and veer to the left and downward. His co-pilot also saw the quick, blink-and-you-miss-it beam and spoke into the intercom, “Something just missed us, Captain.” “Roger that,” was the reply.

The professor was startled by the readings on his iPad which indicated a deflection and a waste of energy. He glanced at the power consumption curve and it dipped briefly then normalized. It made no sense. “Aiee,” thought the professor, “This line of work is never boring.”

That evening he sent an e-mail to a woman that would not know him. Her name was Heather Marcos, network administration worker for the State of New Mexico whose office he knew to be in the state capitol. He certainly knew of her. And he wanted to elevate her position within *Elevados.* He thought of inviting her to a meeting in Ogden. And he would invite Mr. Xappa too.

95

Jim Pappas took Karen Asnat out for a Saturday evening drive, and once again they ended up at the New Beginnings Hit-G site. The police tape was long gone, the sides of the hole had weathered, but it was still there, gaping back at anyone looking in. He brought two lawn chairs and set them up. It was a warm, beautiful evening. He also brought a carafe of iced tea and two plastic cups. She was charmed and found nothing strange at all about the setting. They enjoyed their iced tea and read from her Gideon’s New Testament, the one with the Psalms in the back. They selected Psalm 37. They would alternately read a verse to each other.

Jim: “Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity.”

Karen: “For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.”

Jim: “Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.”

Karen: “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.” She looked at Jim and smiled.

Jim: “Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.”

Karen: “And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday.”

Jim: “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.” Jim did not know the cause of the hole in front of them, but clearly it was a wicked device sourced in someone who prospered in his way.

Karen: “Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil.”

Jim: “For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth.”

Karen: “For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be.” She wondered about that; will the place of the wicked be like this hole?

Jim: “But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.”

Karen: “The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.” She and Jim both laughed.

Though there were a few more verses in the psalm they stopped there. Karen said, “The heading says that this is a psalm of David. I don’t know why, but that kind of



makes it special in my mind. Maybe because we know so much about David and can read into his psalms more background.”

“So much of what we read seems like things we have been seeing in these last few months,” Jim observed.

“Yes,” Karen agreed.

He looked at her. “You know, Miss Asnat, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I think we make a good team.”

She was quiet, savoring a memory in the making. Once in a while, if you’re paying attention, she thought, you can sense those. Then she said, “Kind sir, you want to marry me?”

“I do, indeed pretty lady, I do indeed,” he said with an animated voice. “And the sooner the better!”

Karen wanted to marry this man in the worst way. She said, “How and where and when, Mr. Pappas?”

“I know it isn’t much of a building,” he looked around, “But right here,” he said. He looked at her to see the reaction.

“Here? From one viewpoint this is a historical site, and I know that’s an important thing for you,” she said.

“It is, it is,” he agreed. “There was once a thriving and wonderful community right here. Not as old as the Native Americans but just as beautiful. Once upon a time it was called the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship, although nary a brick nor board remains.”

“Would there be enough room for all the people I want to invite?” she asked, frowning, calculating.

Jim looked around, pretended to be measuring, and said, “Just barely. Of course, we will have to put some tape up again. We don’t want anyone falling into the hole. Rough place, that.”

She grabbed him, kissed him, and held on to him in the breezy dusk. “I love you, sir. And yes, that would be wonderful. And we shall ‘exult with trust.’”

* * * * *

When Ms. Marcos received the email from Professor João Manuel Hernández of the University of São Paulo in Brazil she frowned for a second in confusion, then it hit her. She knew what this was about. She instinctively looked around, a little paranoid. A sadness hit her too as she thought about Sergio and Julio. This man had apparently been connected and wished a meeting with her in Ogden. She would need to invent a good reason to tell her co-workers and the governor to cover her tracks. Then she read the rest of the e-mail. They would be joined in the meeting by a government consultant, Mr. Xappa from the regional IRS office. She sat back, stunned. This must be the same person that she was confidentially investigating. Her head spun. “Wait a minute,” she said to herself. “Does that make me some kind of *agente doble*?” Her core fierceness kicked in at that point. A moment of uncertainty yielded a flash of bravado. And hatred. Her two closest friends had died for their cause, albeit in the estimation of many, an avaricious and evil cause. She had no one anymore . . . except Julianna.

* * * * *

*Screegion was pouting. Its cohorts watched its mood and took their cue accordingly. They fretted that no humans had been killed lately. It was far too long for their black satisfaction. The Archas had not shown itself recently but Screegion knew that most evil of presences was near. It could be felt. There was no disparity of purpose among them all. It was evident: destruction of human souls.*

* * * * *

Jim Pappas was finding reasons to visit the capitol more frequently. Each time he wandered past the Network Administration pod he glanced about. On this day he had e-mailed Governor Grimley. She had been out of town, making a swing through



a few New Mexico towns and giving brief speeches. But today she was in her office and immediately answered his email: *Yes, come on over. 11 a.m. would be good.* He would walk over from the Bataan Building and chat with her. The time had come for the governor to be brought up to speed on the covert nature of one of their team.

Today he took with him a small device given to him by their state trooper team member. It was a new item to squelch any listening devices that might have been planted in the governor’s office. It did so by broadcasting a multi-frequency mishmash of white noise. It could not be heard by the human ear, and it made sure no normal voice conversations could be, either. He had it in his coat pocket and had it switched on. As they sat down and relaxed, he showed her that he had this item, but did not speak of it audibly. She had a look of surprise on her face, but trusted Mr. Pappas and nodded. He remarked, “A new layer of security for us.”

Pappas was on edge. “Madam Governor, I’m a little nervous. But the time has come for you need to be aware of an informal investigation that Officer Duvall, Mr. Cohen, and myself have been exploring.”

“Indeed. Tell me more,” replied the governor.

“Since the first capitol attack, we have been carefully, respectfully, watching an employee here. Slowly, tentatively at first. I think Cohen used the term surveil.” He stopped there to let this sink in.

“I’m listening. But may I ask why?” She pointed at the device.

“Um, yes, of course, but best we talk about that later. We have been looking into, since the first attack, a certain well-placed computer expert,” Pappas continued. The governor’s eyebrow raised, but she said nothing. “And I hesitate to mention this person’s name, actually.”

The governor absent-mindedly looked around the office, “Mention it, please.”

“Uh . . . yes . . .,” he stuttered. “Yes ma’am, of course, and that is why I am here. Specifically, it is a person of interest, I think.”

“Jim, are we thinking of an administrator of the networking function in our capital?” she asked, saving him the need to actually mention a name. He nodded plainly.

“I see,” she said. “Interesting. Very interesting. And we are just now, these days, partnered together, aren’t we?”

“We are, yes, Governor. In a potentially significant endeavor, in the public interest, I would say,” he said, then laughed nervously. “Madam Governor, I am not used to speaking so, uh, carefully. I really don’t think we are being monitored. But I am being overly cautious.”

“I understand, Jim. Yes. I am also being careful these days. Here. Come walk with me,” and she got up, and he put his suppressor in his pocket, but left it on. They walked through the narthex of the governor’s suite, into the atrium area, followed by Carlos, staying back a few yards. They passed the Network Administration pod, careful not to look in but the governor noted that Ms. Marcos was at her station, at work.

Governor Grimley was talking loudly, in an animated way, laughing, about coffee. They walked to a balcony area not generally accessed by many but perfect for this conversation. There were two retro-artsy chairs on the balcony and the view was wonderful, looking out over that part of the city. They sat.

“Mr. Pappas,” she said. “I can’t say that I am completely surprised. I am very fond of the person we are alluding to, but I have had some suspicions and for a while now, but I was not sure why. Now, you’re telling me that you and your compatriots have actually been watching her. Setting the issue aside for the moment about you not telling me until now, may I inquire what has spooked you?”

“We held it back for a while, ma’am, to keep you safe, or so we felt. Now, the time has come that you need to be aware—especially since we are looking at an IRS executive, and she is part of that investigation,” Pappas offered. “It might be prudent, at your discretion of course, to bring your two aides in on this too.”

“Bill and Carlos know none of this?” she asked.



Pappas snorted, “Not by our lips, but they are two sharp agents you have there and it would not surprise me if they smelled the same rat. They are discerning men, I’m sure you would agree.”

The governor smirked, “Indeed, they are, Mr. Pappas, and I wouldn’t have anyone else watching my six, as they would say. I will consider your suggestion.”

“Madam Governor, let me fill you in. My suspicion first was aroused when, at the time of the first attack, I overheard a worker in my building having a conversation with the person of interest. My coworker said she had gotten a call from someone here who informed her not only that there had been an attack, but that an SUV had exploded nearby.” He let her digest that.

“I thought, how does someone in the capitol know that an SUV exploded several blocks away just after it happened? News travels fast, but it doesn’t travel that fast. That’s when it began, Madam Governor. I mentioned it to Bob Cohen.”

“And what did he do with it, Jim?” she asked.

“I think he started to watch her, carefully. We had *Demônios* attacks on Christmas Eve, and then the disappearance of a vehicle into a Hit-G hole that showed signs of drug involvement. She was aware of that incident somehow. Then the capitol artwork attack.” The governor rubbed her arm and said, “Yes.”

“Ma’am, she was right there. Of course, she was aiding you and the reception of the art, but her behavior in general has grown more and more suspicious to us. Now we are teamed up to investigate a potentially imminent threat relating to the Hit-G congregations.”

The governor sat upright. She said, “And now she has requested three days off to travel to Ogden to clandestinely look into Mr. Xappa, whom she told me, would be meeting with her and a friend of hers—a certain physicist.” She was looking out over the southern part of the city.

“Really?” said Pappas.

"Really," the governor replied. "Her request is for next Wednesday to Friday, and of course, it was granted to her. She thinks she is going there on our behalf, but I think there's more going on. Who is this physicist? And what is his connection to our Mr. Xappa, assuming it's the same Mr. Xappa? Is she part of the *Demônios*, Jim? Are they part of the *Demônios*? Are we on to more than we even knew?"

Pappas got up and leaned over the railing. He sighed heavily, "Ma'am if you are right, we cannot let her know we suspect her of anything. I think Mr. Duvall and Mr. Cohen need to know about this. I mean, Mr. Cohen is a media guy but he possesses some skills of use to us in this investigation. May I bring him and Officer Duvall up to speed?"

"Who went down in the hole with me?" and she smiled. "Yes Mr. Pappas please do as you suggest. But be very careful. I will update my two aides right away."

"Thank you, Madam Governor," and he walked with her back into the capitol and parted at the elevator. He group-texted both Cohen and Duvall and asked for an evening get-together.

* * * * *

The three men met for dinner in an obscure, unpretentious Mexican restaurant. They ate as men might if women were not around and then got down to business. Pappas informed them of Ms. Marcos' upcoming trip and of Lucille Grimley being the one who projected the evidence all the way to the theory of *Demônios* involvement and of the existence of a mysterious physicist.

"Interesting," Cohen said. "Physics, Hit-G, Captain Philipsburg, drugs, assassination attempts, and on and on. I've got quite a story shaping up here."

Pappas groaned. "Please do not ruin our investigation by writing about it," he said, sounding more like a bureaucrat than ever before.

"And two engagements, don't forget," said Duvall and smiled widely.

Cohan rolled his eyes. "Yes, and them too."



"Jim, you look online and see if you can figure out who this Ogden physicist is. You need to be our liaison with the governor too in case we get into some kind of trouble. Avon, you see if you can rig any tracking of Ms. Marcos on this trip. Is that even possible?"

Duvall thought, *I'll see what I can do.*

Pappas said, "I can do that. I know some people in Ogden, scientist-types. They might have a lead or two."

Cohen said, "I will actually go to Ogden, maybe set up a get-away with my colleague and float a quiet little watch-game," and looked intent, amused, smart, and every bit the Navy Sea Air and Land sailor he once was.

Later that evening Bob stopped by Mindy's apartment. She was home and opened the door with her pistol in hand. She laid it down on the table next to the door and kissed her fiancé, whom she was not expecting. He said, "Gotta talk to you for a minute."

"You've got that not-drinking-beer-tonight, serious look on your face."

He said, "I gotta go to Ogden this week. We're on to something hot. Do you want to come with me?"

"Hell yeah! I'm a news person, remember? What's up?" she said excitedly. She picked up her Berretta 9mm and kissed it.

He looked at her in disbelief. She was embarrassed then said, "I'm sorry. What's on your mind, sir?"

"Ms. Marcos is a person of interest these days, as you know. We are doing two things. We are working with her, and we are surveilling her because we suspect she knows something about *Demônios*."

Mindy said, "Wait—what?"

"We suspect she knows something about *Demônios*," Cohen repeated.

“I heard you but isn’t that counterintuitive?” Mindy asked.

“It is. Ain’t the news world fun? Look, the governor has pulled together an unofficial task force to look into this IRS crap being laid at the feet of the Hit-G churches. Noble stuff. And Ms. Marcos is with us on this as a computer nerd and she is going to look into the IRS guy—in Ogden—who wrote the initial letter to them all. Now we learn she’s going there on Wednesday to actually meet with the guy, and that some Ogden physicist is in on this meeting too. We think there’s more going on here.”

“More going on. You mean like *Demônios* stuff?” Mindy asked.

“You got it. We don’t know,” Cohen talked quieter now, “Pappas is gonna explore who this physicist guy is, Duvall’s gonna see if he can get Ms. Marcos tracked up there somehow, and I, my dear, with you at my side if you want to come along, will do some clever surveilling myself. Unless you’re too busy, which I would understand,” and put on a sad pout.

“Bite me, sir,” she said. “I haven’t accumulated all this depressing experience for nothing. Of course, I want to go. Separate rooms though, I insist.” His eyes flew open in mock surprise.

“My intentions are only the most honorable, madam. And you know why there are no women SEAL team members, don’t you?” he said.

“Shaddup and I don’t want to hear it,” and she grabbed him and hugged him so tightly he thought she might go right through him.

He laughed, told her he would text her the details, and went to the door. As he was leaving, he gingerly picked up her Berretta and kissed it. He said, “Lock the door behind me. You want my two Claymores?” She flipped him the bird and laughed.

96

The two priests had thought they had entered the Twilight Zone. They found themselves drinking more than they ever had. Together. Strangely, neither drank



much when alone, but when Fathers Frank and Marty were colleagues, team-members in the same great church tradition, shepherds of relatively small Catholic parishes, and most recently best of friends, it seemed appropriate to lubricate their off-duty discussions. When together they unbuttoned their collars and shared a few cold ones, a few martinis, and nowadays a few drinks of higher octane. They viewed themselves as patrons of a high-priced opera, possessing the most expensive seats. Since the first days and weeks of this drama they had been involved, but now with the Cavern Fellowships functioning smoothly, they played more of a supportive role. However, the whole incident was still very upsetting to each man. They saw themselves as somehow drawn in by divine providence to some great story and each wished to have more time on the stage. But they did not know anything more to do, so they waited, performed their usual sacerdotal duties, and they drank.

* * * * *

On a whim, Bob Cohen thought to invite Father Marty to go to Ogden with him and Mindy. The priest wasn’t interested in getting in the middle of another gun battle but Cohen assured him that he would be kept out the line of fire. Cohen wondered if the priest, who no one would know at all in Ogden, might be willing to be another set of eyes. He offered to pay the priest’s two overnight hotel bills and to feed him. Father Clark accepted the invitation. “When do we leave,” he asked?

Cohen, McConnell, and Clark drove to Ogden and the two men checked into two rooms in a Motel 6. Mindy checked into the same hotel where they knew Heather would be staying and having dinner with the two men.

Within *Demônios* intelligence, Bob Cohen was now only known by Heather Marcos. His attempted taking out by the Julio/Sergio team was not something Julio had communicated to anyone else. It had not occurred to Heather to communicate up the ladder that she was now in league with Cohen in an investigation of Mr. Xappa. And Heather did not yet know Xappa was in league with the professor from Brazil.

Heather was being watched closely upon arrival by a Utah State Highway Patrol undercover officer named Jessica Young, one of only thirty female state highway patrol officers in the state. She was a descendent of Brigham Young. She was blonde and in undercover attire, dressed as one might expect any young Mormon

woman to dress who was staffing a faux Latter Day Saints information kiosk. She also had at her disposal a surveillance telescope, tripod, an iPhone 13, two long-range listening microphones as well as two 9mm handguns—one in her purse and one in her room—with several extra magazines. She had been following the New Mexico shenanigans with interest over the past year. New Mexico State Trooper Avon Duvall had called in a favor in getting her assigned to Ms. Marcos for the duration of her stay in Ogden. She had text messaged Cohen when she was on site and had seen Heather check into the hotel.

Father Clark was also watching and pretending to have other business around the hotel. He was watching for Heather and acting very priestly to anyone who wanted to chat. Catholic priests were not common in the State of Utah and the assignment and time away from Santa Fe for a couple of days picked up his spirits. He had also observed Heather checking in and texted Cohen.

As Mindy McConnell had not been around Ms. Marcos very often it was safe to assume that Heather would not notice her presence. But in case she did, Mindy dressed in her standard CNN business suit and decided to don a small CNN pin. If spotted she could act the part of a journalist on assignment. Ogden is larger than Santa Fe in population, is a major rail town for freight, and is home to the 26,000 student Weber State University. There would be plenty of potential news items in this city and should she need some reason to explain her presence it would be easy to make up something.

Mindy was lounging in the bar, working on her laptop, which had been scrubbed clean of anything except CNN news related content. She also left a couple of games on board. She also had a real news-related conversation on her cell phone with her boss in Atlanta. Heather entered the bar area, looked around, and saw Mindy. She came over to her and said, “You’re the CNN lady, yes?”

Mindy played the part perfectly. “Yes, and you are?”

“I am Heather Marcos, from the New Mexico State Capitol,” Heather said coolly.

“Right. Ms. Marcos, I think we met there a couple of times,” and Mindy smiled.



“What are you doing here in Ogden, Ms. . . .?” asked Heather, not remembering Mindy’s name.

“McConnell. Mindy McConnell.” She shook Heather’s hand and offered her business card.

“A good story, I presume?” inquired Heather again.

Mindy of course was well-prepared. “A hot one, I hope.”

She looked out the door towards the university. She had gone online to the university’s web site for events and learned of two that might be of public interest. There was a climate rebirthing conference and a Native-American festival, both of which were interests of the governor. Heather bought the ruse and Mindy spoke of each as if she would be reporting for her network on both.

“My boss loves both climate issues and the cause of the Native-Americans,” bragged Heather.

“Your boss?” asked Mindy with her reporter voice.

“Yes, my boss is Governor Lucille Grimley, of New Mexico. I work in network administration at the capital. I’m here on business for her, in fact,” offered Heather.

“Good luck with that,” laughed Mindy, and offered, “Would you like to join me for a drink?”

“No, thank you, I’m meeting a couple of friends for dinner,” declined Heather. “But if I see you around tomorrow, maybe we can chat then.”

Mindy smiled again, “Absolutely. Have a nice dinner and I’ll see you around perhaps.”

Heather was off then, into the restaurant. Mindy knew better than to try to plant a microphone device with Heather—the kind Heather herself had planted in the governor’s presence. Cohen had briefed her, “Keep your eyes on her whenever you can without being obvious. That’s what we need.” Mindy went back to her laptop

but out of the corner of her eye she noticed where Heather had seated herself in the restaurant. She was indeed with two gentlemen friends, neither of whom looked anything near her age. Mindy also noticed Jessica Young in the restaurant, giving out LDS brochures, table to table. Mindy glanced and saw her stop for a moment at Heather's table and be shooed off by its occupants.

* * * * *

In this day of the world wide web, any person of notoriety, especially in the scientific disciplines, finds it virtually impossible to achieve anonymity. Knowing this, Professor João Manuel Hernández of the University of São Paulo Brazil didn't even try. His strategy was to maintain a high visibility when in the United States speaking, presenting papers, and visiting labs. In so doing, he believed his most passionate pursuits would be cloaked. He even spoke openly of high precision linear imaging and other technologies that were indeed within his purview of expertise.

When Jim Pappas researched physicists in Utah, he also called two fellow Preservationist-types in Utah, to ask if they knew any notable physics experiments or research projects in their state. They did indeed and told him about a Brazilian physicist who has travelled from his country to Utah a few times, ostensibly on scientific collaboration missions. Oddly, they said, Professor Hernández has a particular fondness for Ogden, Utah, and one hotel especially where he likes to publicly relax on occasion. *Score,* thought Pappas.

* * * * *

The restaurant was not ostentatious by any measure, a nice bar and grill basically, and its menu was modest. It was judged fully adequate by the professor for his occasional social needs in Ogden. Mr. Xappa entertained more favored places of cuisine because he lived in Ogden, but he was compliant with the professor's preference. Heather Marcos had no feeling one way or another as to the restaurant and ordered chicken and pasta salad for dinner. She was watching Mr. Xappa closely and noticed his specification that his small steak be cooked very rare. The professor ordered a distinctly un-Brazilian chicken-fried steak with gravy, sweet potatoes, and steamed vegetables. All boring, Heather thought. Julio could have crafted a better dinner menu in his sleep.



The professor was interesting and Heather enjoyed his Brazilian charm. He referenced, here and there, scientific things that were impressive. Mr. Xappa, an employee of the IRS, was quiet though affable. She decided to play her presence as friendly and innocent although it was obvious why they were meeting. She decided to break the ice.

"Gentlemen, are we here to discuss Santa Fe?" she asked.

"We are indeed," said Professor Hernández. "Your assistance with our organization," and he waited for Mr. Xappa to reveal himself.

"Yes, Heather, we are part of a wider enterprise that you have found profitable, I suspect," Francis said.

Heather had mixed feelings. "Yes, Francis, we are, or at least I used to be, and happily so, until my two friends were killed," she said in a lowered voice.

The professor acted sad. "Yes dear, their demise was tragic. The simple goal of the art delivery—which I felt Julio had masterminded as a brilliant ruse—was a failure. But there is always more product. And always more profit, too," he laughed.

"We also have a more elegant goal, Heather. One that I do not know if you fully comprehend," Xappa added. Heather listened.

"We not only enjoy the hungry American appetite for product, but we loathe the American appetite for misguided religion, don't we Francis?" the professor explained.

Heather felt clueless, but she guarded herself and asked, "May I ask what that is?"

"Yes Heather, you may," the professor went on, his voice was lower now too. "I am happy to bring you—how do you Americans say it—up to speed? As you know, I am a renowned physicist—did I mention that I did my PhD work at Caltech? Anyway, physics has been my life's work. But my crown jewel achievement has been something I like to call the 'T' beam. Have you heard of it?"

“No, I have not, but I am a network administrator not a physicist,” she said curtly.

The professor and the IRS officer both chuckled. Heather was not amused. “But, my dear, you have seen it.” Heather looked blankly at them, and then her eyes widened and she said, “The house in Las Campanas?”

“Indeed, you are quick on the draw madam,” the professor said. “That was the ‘T’ beam. Or more definitively, the split focused beam array.”

Francis interrupted, “He really likes to call it the ‘Spt-beam,’” and chuckled. “I believe, saw it in action. It made that lovely little house go *poof*.”

Heather was quiet but agreed, “Scared the *bendita mierda* out of me. I could have been in that house!”

“But you were not, and let me just say,” the professor used his most condescending tone of voice, “I watched you and the other woman exit the house and then and only then did we, or should I say . . .” he tapped the iPad on the table, “I engaged the split focused beam array.” He watched her face turn to amazement but she quickly composed herself.

“And where, may I ask, did it go?” she inquired. “It was there and then suddenly, very cleanly, gone. No smoke or noise, just a funny smell.”

“Indeed, ‘go’ is an interesting word. It went . . .” and he gestured upwards.

“These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise,*” Xappa recited. Heather was Mexican but she plainly knew the reference.

“Into space?” she asked.

“Or more specifically,” the professor amended, “Into orbit,” and smiled broadly.

She was silent, and truly astonished. But the next question hit her immediately. “And their places of absurd religion?” she queried.



The professor looked at Xappa and remarked, “This person has a quick and analytical mind.” Xappa said nothing. “Yes Heather, those too, all twenty of them. They float where they can hurt no one and deceive no gullible minds and no longer harvest hard earned wages from the poor citizenry. We are rectifying that.”

Xappa scanned her, watching for a response. But Heather had not become less ruthless nor fallen out of sympathy with their conspiracy. She threw her hair back and said, “Excellent. Will there be another delivery of art soon?”

Now Xappa chuckled again and relaxed too. “Yes, I think there will be. There will be more interesting disappearances too. We might even add a few human worshippers next time.”

Now Heather became all business. “And how can I help, gentlemen? I am as committed as before to the endeavors. Although I must admit you have educated me on an element that I could not have imagined. But be assured, the overall goal of our commerce is of great interest to me. As you know, I am nicely *situada* near the good governor.”

“You are,” the professor agreed. “Perhaps someday, I can make her acquaintance in a more informal way.” He raised his eyebrows in a way that chilled the ruthless Maria Tomasia. “You will hear from me now. My communication will not be frequent but it will be, shall we say, informative and specific as to instructions.” He pulled a new cell phone from his jacket pocket and placed it on the table. “Your compensation will be adequate, I assure you, and securely transferred as you might instruct us.”

“Are we done, sirs? I am quite weary,” she asked.

*Screegion was placed right next to Xappa. He suggested into the man’s ear, “You may have the privilege of caring for the bill tonight.”*

Xappa scanned the room and pronounced that now would be a good time to terminate their evening. “We are tired too. We will be in touch. You may have the privilege of caring for the tip tonight,” and smiled an eerie, crooked smile.

Heather placed a $100 bill on the plate with the check and said, “Gentlemen, it has been a delight to meet you both. I look forward to our collaboration and I will watch my new device for direction.” She bent down and placed a simple double-kiss on each of the men’s right cheeks—a *Demônios* identifying signal—and said good night. She left the restaurant and returned to her room, as did both the professor and Xappa, amused at the large tip she left for the server.

LDS worker Jessica Young had been manning her kiosk, looking bored and chatting briefly with the occasional passerby or patron. She gave it thirty minutes and then packed up her literature and display posters. An LDS booth in Utah may seem unnecessary to some, but to this highway patrol undercover officer it was a good piece of stealth. Her table had a gift-wrapped box on it which said, *Ask me about The Gift*. Inside was a portable and sophisticated parabolic microphone connected to a small recorder—its tip protruded at the lower corner of the box, impossible to see unless one was looking for it. The whole conversation, forty feet away at the *Demônios* table, was now a matter of record. The fidelity left something to be desired, but the content was plain and quite audible. In her own hotel room, she listened to it fully. She texted Bob Cohen and arranged to provide him with the recording the next day.

* * * * *

Cohen, McConnell, Clark, and Young rendezvoused the next day 270 miles away in Moab, Utah. Each of them possessed the sense that it was not possible to be too careful. They planned to meet in the late afternoon in the coffee shop of a low-budget hotel. Mindy was the last to leave Ogden, spending a couple hours on campus and acting interested in the festival’s preparations. Then she was to drive herself in a non-descript rental to meet them in Moab.

Cohen was maudlin. McConnell was animated and excited to discuss what they had learned. Young was only at the beginning this unique and fascinating conspiracy that was almost too bizarre to believe. She knew to let the other two do most of the talking.

“Well, sailor, the Hit-G has hit the fan,” quipped Mindy.



“I can hardly believe what we heard,” Cohen mumbled. “What do we do with this intel?”

Mindy said, “We can’t sit on it too long. It sounds like they are planning more mischief, possibly endangering lives.”

Young then said, “It also seems like there’s more involved than just those three people.”

Cohen then explained, “Officer, there is a large Brazilian drug cartel at root in all this. I don’t know what the professor’s connection is, or the IRS agent’s either, but this plan of theirs needs to be outed soon, but carefully. I would not be surprised if they didn’t have connections all over the place. But why target Santa Fe, New Mexico?”

“Somehow I am not surprised,” said Young. “The Mormon Church has seen some persecution over the years. I am no longer a Mormon, but I was raised in it and there was this built-in feeling of always looking over your shoulder that I grew up with. This thing, with these people hating religion, is fascinating but, can I tell you, tiring too.”

At that point, Marty Clark walked into the place, looked around—not acknowledging his friends at first, went to the counter, ordered a latte, waited, and finally sat down and said, “Yo, comrades.” Cohen smiled and brought the priest up to the present on what they had learned.

Mindy then commented, her mind on the news-cycle, “Where do we go with this news?”

Cohen had been thinking for hours about nothing else. He rubbed his eyes, stood up, walked over to the coffee bar, refilled his cup, and sat back down.

He took out a pad and pen. “Let’s make two columns.” He drew a line down the middle of the pad. “What we have to do, and what mistakes we want to avoid. What must we do immediately?” he said.

Officer Young said, “I think this Mr. Xappa needs to be under careful surveillance immediately.” Cohen deferred to her being a Utah state officer. He wrote that down under the left column. He also wrote in all caps, in the right column, “DON’T SPOOK DEMÔNIOS.” Then he thought to add, “Don’t tip media,” which briefly made Mindy scowl, but she understood the potential of a media disaster so she did not comment.

Mindy then said, “The Governor of New Mexico needs to be put on alert somehow.”

“More problematic I think, but yes, Ms. Marcos is right there under her nose.” He wrote that down too.

Then Cohen offered, “The state police need to know something is brewing and clearly the Air Force needs to know about this space technology.”

“That leaves only, the FBI, the CIA, the White House, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Space Command, the National Guard, the Brazilian government, the Mexican government,” she coughed, “My CNN boss, and my mom.”

The humor escaped Officer Young. She said, “I will carefully inform a superior in the state police, and I am sure you will agree that Mr. Xappa is a dangerous person of interest. My contact is not an immediate superior but is trustworthy and competent. He will take proper and covert steps towards tracking Mr. Xappa’s activities. The thing is that this whole conspiracy is known by only four of us. We get taken out and people will die.”

Cohen and McConnell were both impressed with this young woman’s sense of the wider dangers already.

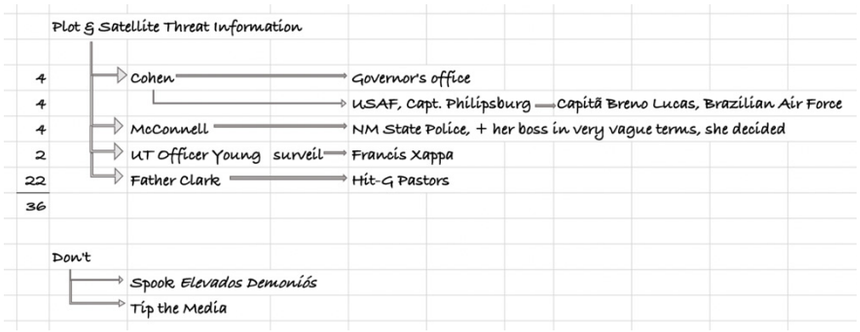
Cohen suggested that he be the one to pass this information on to the governor’s people. How to do that, he still had to calculate. Perhaps he could request one of her aides to arrange on off-site meet. Mindy would alert the New Mexico State Police, with whom she had gained esteem. Cohen would contact the Air Force as his first priority. By now, Captain Philipsburg had been in communication with his friend, Brazilian pilot Capitão Breno Lucas. Cohen would invite Philipsburg to



clandestinely get the information to Lucas. They would need to trust the pilot to be secure with the volatile and now international plot machination.

Cohen and McConnell said good-bye to Officer Young, who headed back to Salt Lake City. Then the two drove, separately now, back to Santa Fe. Cohen wondered if his RV had been visited. Mindy wondered the same about her apartment. Marty Clark had volunteered to carefully alert each of the Hit-G pastors that a wider conspiracy was underway and a possible attack was imminent.

Cohen transferred the piece of paper with two columns to a diagram on another slip of paper, tore it off the pad and gave it to Mindy, who memorized it, chewed it up, and spit it in the trash. He looked at her, shook his head, and said, “You keep showing me new skills.” She chuffed and spat back, “So much to learn you have.” The diagram existed now only in the minds of those two.




They both had excellent memories and referred to the chart as “The 36,” referring to the thirty-six people who were expected to make up the club that would soon know what the *Demônios* operatives were planning.

*Kuriosagapa had rendered some cover, in that this coffee shop stratagem meeting remained undiscovered to Screegion and his co-workers by means of a distasteful distraction. The angel and two others did a series of spirit-world fly-bys over, around, and under the coffee shop for two hours. It looked like a demonstration of power and glory, illuminating their arms and legs and visages with a brilliant and purely beautiful bluish glow, the blue angels’ paths choreographed as a dance or flight plan. The demons assumed they were showing off, and disgusted, spit-poofed themselves away in dark-green bursts of putrid spirit-world gas.*

* * * * *

The two priests sat in Father Portacomaro's office at Santa Maria Chapel. Clark informed Portacomaro of the revelations in Ogden. Portacomaro was shocked. He shook his head in disbelief. "This is persecution, Marty, pure and simple, and it is also pure evil."

Clark said nothing. Even though he had the long drive back to Santa Fe to get used to the notion of an impending attack, he was still incredulous, shaking his head too. "Santa Maria, have mercy," he mumbled.

"Somehow," Portacomaro said, "I feel that we need to appeal higher than to the Blessed Virgin," which was a rare thing for the priest to even think, let alone say. To his surprise, the other priest nodded in agreement.

He then prayed, spontaneously, "Holy Father, may the precious Spirit of Your blessed Son grant us insight and wisdom, that we may know how to assist our friends, our wayward brethren, and we pray that Your powerful Providence might intervene and intercept this evil plot. Amen."

Clark bowed his head and also said, "Amen." The two priests both stared at the floor. What a strange time they were given to live in, and each had a vague feeling that something important was going to happen. It humbled them.

* * * * *

The counter-intelligence information campaign was on. McConnell messaged her boss in Atlanta that she was in the early stages of developing a major story. It would take some time, but she said, "Be assured, it is a blockbuster." Her boss let her go with it.

Father Marty Clark spent the better part of a week moving between as many of the Protestant clergy from the Cavern Fellowships as he could find. His story was simple, with enough warning that each fellowship should redouble their security watchfulness and create their own, individual rotation of locations. Although he was a Catholic priest, each pastor had come to trust this ally. It was not an easy task. Santa Fe did not possess an overabundance of available rental spaces for large



groups of people, but the pastors did the best they could. These were dangerous times for conservative Protestants.

Cohen met with Captain Philipsburg, who informed him that he had been in touch with his Brazilian friend and passed along as much information as was appropriate. Lucas was amazed and fascinated at the same time and assured Captain Philipsburg that a careful state-security watch could be established on the physics professor, but this would need to be done very carefully and would also take some time to establish.

Cohen also met with Pappas. These two had become good friends, collaborators, joint-engaged to their fiancés, and colleagues. In Cohen's mind, he included Jim Pappas to "The 36" which made it now "The 37." He liked that number better anyway. Episode 37 was the original *Star Trek* episode, "The Changeling," with the rediscovered Twenty-first century space probe called *Nomad.*

97

Professor Hernández was working on his iPad. He had received a text message from Mr. Xappa, who had received up to date target sets of meeting locations from Ms. Marcos for the twenty hit-G congregations. He looked at his watch and saw that it was ten thirty on Sunday morning. *What a good time,* he thought, *for their rapture to occur,* and he laughed to himself. He selected one fellowship at random. He, of course, knew none of these stupid American religious fanatics. It really made no difference which congregation he chose. The satellite was in position and the "T" beam was fully ready. He aimed its emitter at what was listed as a Lion's Club Hall where he was informed the Southwest Evangelical Free Church had been meeting. *Free, h*e thought to himself, *there is nothing free in churches . . . such fools. They deserve a little tumble into space.* The professor tapped a few spots on the screen. The satellite indicated reception and shot its beam on to the Lion's Club address.

As it happened, this was a huge miscalculation and faulty assumption by on-the-ground source, Ms. Marcos. In Santa Fe, the Lions don't actually own their own facility. They use space in the large Montecito of Santa Fe Center, an assisted living facility. The Free Church was posted as meeting there on this particular Sunday, although it was not. Heather Marcos assumed it was a stand-alone building. It was

not. In a moment, the main entrance, and the central foyer were gone. Nothing left but a hole in the ground. As usual, a clean hole.

Because it had been advertised as the current meeting location for the SW Free Church, and The 38 were paying attention, State Trooper Avon Duvall was parked in his RAM a half-block away. He had no knowledge that the Montecito would be "Spt-beamed" that day. In fact, he thought it an absurd notion. No one would be so audacious as to attack an assisted-living facility. But since it was a Sunday morning and he was on duty, he was watching. A blue haze enveloped the front of the building, and it was gone right in front of his eyes. There was little noise—like a gentle rustling wind. He was stunned. He got out of his truck and ran over to the hole. Two elderly women were sitting on a bench, under the entrance canopy. They were unharmed but stared in shock at what had happened. Duvall, in uniform, touched each on their shoulders and asked if they were harmed but they were not—just speechless. He then peered down into the hole. A vapor was there, which he thought smelled kind of pleasant. He said out loud, "I hope no one was inside."

* * * * *

Duvall sent Bob Cohen a picture of the hole, with the text message: **Again—not sure of casualties.** Cohen showed up in his Jeep fifteen minutes later. Rescue equipment and two fire trucks were already there. Cohen put the item on his website for the news world to see. Duvall, who had witnessed the event, was surrounded by several reporters. Mindy, who saw the post, forwarded it to her supervisor in Atlanta, with the note, "It continues. On it," and she sped to the address. Pappas decided to drive by because he thought, *one never knows what rock might be yet unturned.* It was a Sunday, and he was supposed to meet Karen Asnat for lunch. Not now.

The administrative nurse on duty at the Montecito that Sunday morning came screaming out of a side door, yelling to the EMTs, firemen and police officers, "They're gone! they're gone!" Duvall went over to her, "Who is gone?" He calmed her down, sat her on a bench and learned that three meal service workers and two residents had disappeared. They were in the sections of the facility that had disappeared.



Cohen stood back and under a tree, waiting for the EMTs and others to deal with the distraught nurse. If there was any *Demônios* surveillance at all, he did not want to be spotted, not out of fear, but to avoid tipping them off that the site was being watched. More police arrived and at the thirty-minute mark, a van arrived carrying eight SWAT team members. A command tent was put up, and by then several news vans with their satellite arms were setting up a half-block away, where Duvall's truck had been parked. It would be a full-day affair, tragedy and mystery. But it was no mystery to The 38, which now included Governor Lucille Grimley and her aides, Bill and Carlos. At the forty-five-minute mark, her entourage of three new white Suburbans rolled onto the east end of Arcos Colorados, the street that ran past the Montecito. She exited her vehicle, a look of pure anger on her face, followed on either side by the two aides, who in sunglasses had their head on a swivel. She went to the command tent; the reporters being held off for the moment by state troopers. She huddled with her team, which did not include Ms. Marcos.

Cohen, still standing back, looked around for her Heather but she was not in the group from the capitol. He stood on the sidewalk with Officer Duvall, as he kept news people away, and consoled a few of the on-duty Sunday morning employees. At a lull, he said to Duvall, "The heartless bastards apparently took the bait and targeted the church that was supposed to gather here this morning."

Duvall said, "It was a mistake to advertise a church meeting here. But who would have thought the *Demônios* assholes would so brazenly target an assisted living facility?

Cohen pulled out a three-by-five card and looked at it. "It was the Free Church," he said to Duvall, "The one the governor's daughter is part of." He looked around. "When the governor figures that out she is going to really be pissed."

"And how, *hombre*," was all Duvall could say.

Cohen then texted the governor and suggested they meet when she was done at the scene. The irony was that, unlike a fire or a tornado tragedy, there wasn't much to investigate with a Hit-G event. She answered his text: **Meet me at the capitol in an hour.** She also text messaged her daughter, who immediately responded from the actual place her church had gathered that morning, which was in a city park, outdoors. At least the weather was congenial that day.

* * * * *

Cohen's website and CNN reported that five deaths were assumed to have occurred that morning at the Montecito. They included two Mexican American food workers, one African American nurse, and an elderly couple in their nineties. The news flashed across the country. Heather Marcos was in her apartment, saw the flash and stared ahead. "What about the church?" she said.

* * * * *

In orbit, at two hundred miles altitude and adjacent to twenty church buildings, and one private residence, a strange two-part public building was added to the "T" beam neighborhood, as Professor Hernández termed it. Flying escort, or so it appeared, was a partially de-winged Brazilian Saab Gripen jet fighter, its canopy yawning open and several outward and ugly bursts in the skin of the fuselage where the various reservoirs of pressurized gasses had exploded. Unknown to Hernández, this latest architectural addition to the neighborhood included five sets of human clothing, floating in zero-gravity, but no bodies.

* * * * *

The five human souls, as it happened, all believed in Jesus. Their human bodies had instantaneously died in the "T" beam. This was five murders, but their bodies, inexplicably, were not "Spt-beamed" into space. This was not God's providence for five of His elect. Where they went, no one knew. But they were fine, wherever in glory they now rested.

*Kuriosagapa was there, observing. His reaction, certainly nothing new, was a holy blend of graveness, joy, and a profound insight, embedded in the "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" as the writer of the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews deemed them. He sang to himself, although angels are never outside of the fellowship of their Maker, and it was an utterly new song, and yet a timelessly ancient; a song of praise to the Redeemer, who in His sovereign and ever-wondrous plan had allowed and predestined and engineered this phased-ending for these five souls on this earth. From where they currently sat, none of them minded.*



* * * * *

Bill and Carlos met Cohen and Duvall inside the capitol's grand foyer and ushered them to the elevator and down to the secure meeting area where Governor Grimley awaited them. She had tear streaks on her face but was composed. She went over to Cohen, Bill's hand on her shoulder, and whispered to him, "I am going to kill them, Mr. Cohen, do you understand? Kill them deader than shit."

Cohen looked at her gravely and said, "Yes Madam Governor, I do understand. But if I may suggest, do not ever utter those words out loud again." He glanced at Officer Duvall who was pretending to hear none of this.

She was weeping again.

The three of them sat down at the conference table. Bill stood back, by the door. There was coffee and orange juice set out on the table, plus bottles of water. The coffee was steaming and the juice was cold. The governor fixed a bone china cup of coffee and Cohen and Duvall both helped themselves to glasses of orange juice. The governor began.

"Gentlemen, I am angry. Now that we know what this beaming thing is, and it's not aliens or a foreign government, it is nothing more than an evil, money-grubbing cartel, equipped with a few smart people." She took out a tissue and wiped her eyes once again.

"Yes, Madam Governor, it is that," Duvall responded, "I am glad we have learned that much at least."

Cohen commented, "And who, ma'am, although the five deaths are a terrible tragedy, it is a small relief to know what is happening. We can also assume that the *Demônios* thought that a church was meeting there. Officer, you saw it happen. Any insights?"

Duvall said, "Only that we now know the beam can discriminate pieces of a building, apparently. The whole facility was not taken."

“Interesting, Avon. That is true. I was so absorbed in the deaths I didn’t even think of that. Very interesting indeed,” Cohen offered. “Madam Governor, we are learning.”

“I suppose,” she said, “I want it to stop, do you understand? This has been a clever, a direct, and now a brutal attack on my State. We have great resources at our disposal, not the least of which is the mole in my own administration that we know about.”

“Yes,” Duvall went on, “I think we need to do our best not to spook her. She is a great lead for us.”

“Correct,” the governor answered. “I will leverage my best political demeanor with her. But we need to figure out how to get to her accomplices. How can we do that, gentlemen?”

She paused and said, “I think I will feed her a bogus theory about what we think might be happening and see if I can distract her with a computer search for a fictional perpetrator. What do you think?”

“It is worth a try,” Duvall said, and Cohen nodded.

Then he added, “Send her off looking for a government conspiracy from China or Russia. Give her some clues that you have learned about. It might trigger a message from her to the two men, that will put them at ease.”

“Or more elegantly, from an unpredictable source, such as Saudi Arabia or Nigeria or North Korea; some place in completely the opposite direction from South America,” Cohen mused.

“I like that, Mr. Cohen. North Korea would be a believable source, even if it leaked. We are not too offended these days if North Korea is offended,” the governor added. “Officer Duvall. Could you alert Mr. Pappas and see if he can construct some means of tracking Ms. Marcos’ calls? I will contact Officer Young in Ogden with the same request.”



“Another thing,” she said. “The FBI will stop by here within the hour. I’m not fully confident in their own security for information. I mean, the *Demônios* could have infiltrated them. I would like to give them as little information as we can at this point.”

Duvall took that one. “Madam Governor, that is a risky decision. But I must agree with you. Who knows what Ms. Marcos and her friends can get their hands on? On the other hand, we are now in an interstate endeavor, outside the jurisdiction of the State of New Mexico. The Feds have the right and the power to jump in.”

Cohen said, “If I may. For today at least, let me speak with Captain Philipsburg. He’s a Fed, albeit military. Let me ask him what our next move should be. Governor, perhaps you can stall the FBI for a day or so.”

“I think I can do that,” said Grimley, although not with a lot of confidence. Balancing state and federal jurisdictions of an incident, especially one involving multiple states, is always a delicate dance.

* * * * *

It wasn’t an FBI agent who first came by the governor’s office. It was two Homeland Security personnel, a man and woman team. Dramatically, they were armed and Kevlar-vested. Bill and Carlos were both hesitant to grant admittance but the governor came out of her office and waved them off. She invited them into the conference room and said, “This has been a bad day.”

The personnel agreed and asked some basic questions. “Was there any advance warning of the beam? Were any suspicious people seen around the facility? Does she know anything about this light beam?” The last one she answered in a bold-faced lie. “How would I know about this beam? I wish I did.” The agents nodded, thanked her, and expressed their condolences at the governor’s loss of five New Mexico citizens. Carlos showed them out.

* * * * *

Captain Philipsburg was with his wife, at the Sunday morning worship service of the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship, which this day was gathering in the late

morning at the Santa Maria Chapel. Bob Cohen sat in his Jeep outside and waited. He approached the captain as the service ended.

“Captain, have you heard what happened this morning?” he asked.

Bruce and Sarah Philipsburg both looked at him. “Um no, we have been in church,” he said.

Cohen explained, “Two sections of an assisted living facility down on Arcos Colorados disappeared this morning. There were five casualties.”

Sarah exclaimed, “Oh my God!”

“Captain, that was the site,” Cohen went on, “where we had advertised that the Southwest Free Church would be having church today. They were not there, as you know, but the news was picked up by the beamers and an attack happened. The governor asked me to talk to you for some advice.”

Philipsburg kissed his wife and said, “I need to go.” She looked nervous. “Don’t worry,” he said, “I won’t be gone long.”

Cohen and Philipsburg drove over to Cohen’s RV, went inside, and Cohen pulled out two beers. Philipsburg happily accepted one and said, “So what are we gonna do?”

“Captain, I am talking to you because you are a federal employee, sort of. The governor needs a cover story, for the moment, that she is collaborating and talking to the federal government on this. Actually, she is reluctant to talk to Homeland Security or the FBI. That is why this visit is sort of official, me to you on her behalf. That said, we’re wondering what you might imagine could be the next move. Mission is, take out the bastards.”

“Copy that,” was all Philipsburg said.

98



Things began to accelerate now. Captain Philipsburg had another secure video conference with his friend, the Brazilian Air Force fighter pilot. The conversation was brief, dense with information, and coded as much as the spoken word can be. It was very discreet. Philipsburg requested assistance from Brazil. Americans were dying now, and the source was known to be, in part, Brazilian and on a very sophisticated level. The Brazilian pilot was not the least defensive and was sympathetic. At the moment, it was still a top-secret matter but if it lingered much longer this could and would become a major diplomatic crisis. Haste was needed.

From there, Capitão Breno Lucas sent a text message to his nephew, Cadet André Ferreira in São Paulo asking if they could meet for lunch. From their previous visit, the young Ferreira sensed something was up with his uncle, whom he greatly respected. He immediately consented to a lunch and it was set up for two days later.

As well, Capitão Lucas had another resource. Brazil’s Air Force is organized somewhat differently than the USAF. Although being the southern hemisphere’s largest air force, it only employs about 2,400 pilots. Senior aviators like his uncle enjoyed certain technological privileges and responsibilities outside the domain of pilots in other air forces, including those in the USAF. Capitão Lucas, as one of Brazil’s most experienced pilots could request and be given access to Amazônia satellite data and even operational prerogatives if tactical circumstances warranted them. This he requested.

Simultaneously, Utah State Patrol Officer Jessica Young was making good progress. She had hacked into Mr. Francis Xappa’s personal information, deep-hacked his cell phone and managed to find it unscrambled. She thought, *how could an IRS agent of his level leave his cell unguarded from wire taps?* No matter. He did, and she managed a recording technology that activated from his every incoming and outgoing cell call. She also managed to have the recordings immediately streamed to her own state patrol drop box account and a signal sent to her own cell phone each time there was a conversation. She found that Agent Xappa was not a frequent talker nor a long-winded one, but the entries she heard were always interesting, and now important. Her commanding officer assured her that with the gravity of the suspicions, her wiretaps could be found to be completely legal and warranted due to exigent circumstances and national security concerns.

And at the same time, Jim Pappas had also crafted a similar bit of electronic wizardry related to Heather Marcos' communications. This was far trickier because Ms. Marcos was a known wizard herself in such matters. The one advantage that the governor's team still had was that she did not yet suspect that she had been found out. That was about to change.

* * * * *

Julianna Namara had been seeing her cousin, Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia less frequently. But this night they were sharing a nice dinner, as Julianna talked openly and candidly with her cousin. She told Maria/Heather that she had left her profession, but it was uneasy and scanned around the restaurant every couple of minutes.

"They're watching me," she said quietly. "You're not allowed to leave the *hermandad protistia.* Ever." Maria nodded, sympathetically. In point, Maria detested this side of the underworld, and if she could assassinate all pimps, pimp-managers, systems analysts within the profession and the financiers, accountants and bank managers who supported them, she would do so with no twinge of conscience. "Cousin, if I could arrange a giant management conference for all the people who are part of what you have been trapped in, and liquidate them all in one shot, you know *Querida*, I would do so." She had no unsettled feelings about the smuggling of narcotics in art crates. She had no unsettled feelings about the same in packages of baby wipes, the latest innovation. America's insatiable hunger for South American product, especially fentanyl, earned every bit of consequence and in her view, the Americans deserved it all.

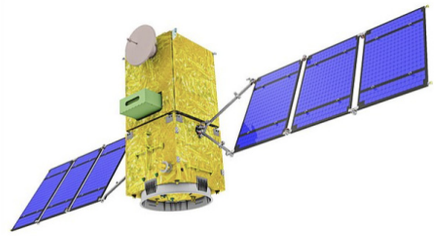
But at Maria's theoretical execution, Julianna flinched, then she said, "I love you, Maria."

It was at that moment that Maria saw a familiar face across the restaurant, albeit under a black Italian fedora. The man was alone, eating a meal, and she saw him glance in her direction several times. She thought to herself, *creo que a mi tambien me vigilan*. This was not a complete shock to her; the man was none other than Carlos, one of the governor's aides. She did not react. She continued in conversation with Julianna, paid the bill and said good night to her cousin. She left the restaurant without looking at Carlos, but now, she thought, *I am in trouble.*



* * * * *

U.S. Space Command currently tracks in excess of more than 47,000 objects in the Earth's orbit, more than double when the command was established in 2019. The objects are divided into three categories: space junk, commercial satellites, and what are considered to be potential orbital threats positioned by China and Russia. Brazil's Amazônia-1, floated above earth in the commercial satellite category.



What was not generally known was that an additional unit, purportedly a science research variation launched in 2021, had been brokered for flight by a consortium of Brazilian scientists whose organizational chair was Professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD.

The cover story was that this unit was tasked for rain forest research, which it performed. But it also included a *reestruturação plasmatizada* "T" beam emitter, manipulable by a single operator from an iPad. Since this satellite's existence was known and approved by some in Brazil's government and their air force, Hernández considered it his own *satélite fantasma,* or ghost satellite. Its orbital trajectory was effectually masked by Brazil's other Amazônia-1. He trusted in the reputation of his brilliance and accomplishments to give him sufficient cover. It was an arrogant assumption.

Since Captain Bruce Philipsburg had alerted Space Command General Mario Haldeman to the discovery of the "T" beam and its malicious activity, the general deployed Space Based Space Surveillance satellite to find and observe the ghost's mission. This particular satellite was equipped with a special enhancement—one which the general considered particularly sexy. The satellite also employed a Force Beam Laser, a kind of phaser weapon. This technology was not new, but its current

nature was new. It could vaporize its target and leave no residual trace. It was "ridiculously clean," the general said. This device was not, however, operable by a single person. It needed a team of three to position the satellite, align and fire the FBL, and then to retrieve and assess the post-activity data. Philipsburg had been invited to be on that team. The SBSS also had what Haldeman liked to call the "icing on the cake."

"Who doesn't like to lick a finger full of icing off a cake? At least as long as no one is looking," he said, and chuckled. In addition to the FBL the SBSS possessed something of a cloaking capability. It was nothing so futuristic as the utterly fictional Romulan cloaking device, but the SBSS was able to at least confuse any tracking that might have it painted. It could replicate its presence in multiple locations in orbit. The more that were coordinated, the less data each presented. Five or so false locations would be enough, they felt, to confuse any stalker.

* * * * *

Capitão Lucas met with Cadet Ferreira for lunch in São Paulo. Neither was in uniform. There was a quiet stealth and gravity to the meeting, but one with warmth too.

Lucas said, "André, a matter is unfolding of the greatest importance. It may not be a benefit to you personally, but I must confide a very secure cache of information with you and then ask you to do something. This is, in essence, for our country."

The young cadet's expression turned serious. "What is it, Tio? I was already worried when you said to not wear my uniform. I am very proud of it, and I am concerned."

Lucas began, "André, a conspiracy of great magnitude has happened, and in fact, is happening now. A major participant is the academic individual who you offered to introduce me to the last time I was here."

The young cadet was stunned. He stood up, stepped back on impact. Then he sat down again and was torn. "What are you talking about?"



The pilot lowered his voice. "Professor Hernández is not who he appears to be. He is a brilliant physicist, to be sure. But the plasmatized restructuring technology has become, how shall I say, bent. It is being used for a destructive purpose."

"That cannot be," the cadet said, with some emotion. "Uncle, I respect you, but have you been compromised by some right-wing extremist cell?"

"There is more, André. Hear me out," the Capitãn said, with more force. "The professor has developed a remarkable achievement with plastmatized restructuring. He is known and celebrated in this university. He also travels to other countries, lectures, and builds his international esteem. In particular, he enjoys a respect in the United States, where of course, he earned his PhD, but there is more going on. In short, and I tell you this truthfully, he has created a destructive use of the technology, it is being used to murder people, Americans specifically so far. It is deployed in space as an aimable beam type of weapon that actually transports its target into space. It has become a military weapon. Our air force is only now learning the breadth and depth and implications of this development."

Ferreira now spoke. "Tio, this is incredible. And if what you say is true, I will help you in any way that I can."

"Thank you, André. I am telling you the truth. But there is still more. There are two other parts of this man that I want you to know. One, the professor is a major participant in the *Demônios Elevados*, the Lofty Demons, and he is extremely dangerous. Do you know who they are?"

"I have read about them. I was not sure if they were real or a fiction created by the press," responded the air cadet.

"They are real, I assure you," continued the Capitãn. "They are a sophisticated cartel for drugs, trafficking, and power based here in Brazil. Their main focus is the United States where, with other cartels, there seems to be a tragic passion for their products. The professor is a high-level leader. In addition, we have learned he has a particular disgust and loathing for American religious fellowships."

"You mean churches, do you not, uncle? Is this connected with the disappearance of those American churches in New Mexico?" the young man inquired.

“You put things together quickly, André,” the pilot said, and laughed quickly. “Yes, it does. This is what happened to them and we have learned, fantastically, that those church structures now float in space at an altitude of two hundred miles. They were, can I say ‘beamed’ there by our professor friend. A few days ago, he beamed another structure, or part of it, into space, but this time with five occupants. They were killed instantly, as you can imagine.”

“Then plasmatized restructuring does not work, uncle, with human tissue?” asked the cadet, “A question my friends and I often debate.”

“It kills, apparently, André, at least if the person is taken into an unpressurized, non-gravity place,” was the pilot’s answer. “I am only speculating of course, but with humans there is more involved than only matter.”

The young man asked, “Why is that so? Matter is matter, is it not?”

“Yes of course, André, and while we do not know what actually happened with those poor people who were inside the latest building that was dissolved . . .” he hesitated.

“Yes, Tio, what?” pressed the cadet.

“I am informed,” he hesitated again, “that by inspection, it is known that only their clothing arrived in space with the structure.” He looked at the floor, almost as if embarrassed to admit this.

“What do you mean by inspection?” André asked.

“This is in strictest confidence, Cadet Ferreira. Of highest state security importance.” The cadet could feel that his uncle meant every word, and he assured the Capitãn of his confidence.

“We are in collaboration with the Americans, the American air force, in particular, cadet. And we have learned that they have managed a visual inspection of the facilities that have been taken to orbit. That includes my Gripen, by the way,” the pilot told him. He then showed Ferreira his phone, which included a dark picture of



a space-floating jet fighter, canopy open, scars in the fuselage, and a wing tip neatly severed.

“I am sad to see this, uncle. It was a beautiful aircraft. I had hoped to fly it someday,” and he truly seemed saddened.

“And you will, my rising nephew, with God’s grace and hard work on your part. Our beautiful nation needs pilots and patriots like you in the decades to come,” said the Capitãn wistfully.

“What became of the human bodies,” the young man asked?

“Of course, the professor has not published this detail,” Lucas said, sarcastically. “But assuming, as we have all been taught by the church, that humanity is made up of several components other than just matter, organic or inorganic. It is made up of intellect, volition and,” he paused a second, “spirit. It seems from what the Americans have discovered in the disappearance of these bodies—and with no trace of tissue residue remaining—that they have somehow been taken elsewhere.”

“I do not understand, uncle,” Ferreira said, sincerely.

“Nor do I, André. We are learning a great deal these days,” Lucas said. “So here is what I need you to do, if you are willing. I will not insist, of course, but you are positioned as a physics, astrophysics, and mathematics student, and are surely known by the professor.”

“Yes, he knows me and on one occasion said that perhaps I had some promise,’” he laughed. “I hope he did not mean as part of these darker endeavors, uncle.”

“If it would be possible, I need you to gain access to his office, and search for any evidence at all of his research. Specifically, how he activates the plasmatized restructuring beam. That is the procedure we need to learn about. Do you understand? It will be dangerous. But I assure you that it is for your country, and that you will be provided with support,” the Capitãn said.

Ferreira stood, forgetting that they were not in uniform, then sat down, placed his hand on his uncle's and said, "*Por seu commando*," by your command.

Lucas smiled, and said very quietly, "It is not an order, nephew, but a request, and perhaps even an invitation."

At this point, with a few more details shared, they went their separate ways: the cadet to his barracks, and the pilot back to the air terminal. Both were, as the Americans like to say, "on the same page."

99

The young air cadet and brilliant student spent many hours in the next few days in the Physics Building. He had his own carrell there, with books, files, and locked disk storage. He worked off a seriously enhanced laptop computer which was never out of his sight. As he studied, normal with his peers, he was about the professor's routine. The colleagues, almost always had generally left for the day around know where the professor lived, mentioned casually that he residence was some distance Ferreira, *I do not need much time* fingers over the epaulet on his *cadete do terceiroano,* third year cadet insignia on it: three silver embroidered bars connected on a deep blue field, and a pair of wings bisected by a sword.

watched, acted completely learning more and more man taught classes, met with lunch in his office, and five thirty. Ferreira did not but a fellow student thought the professor's away. *That is fine*, thought *in his office.* He passed his shoulder which had the

* * * * *

Professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD, was as misted and fogged as the fallen human condition can display. He would never have assigned his perspective to lack of educational opportunities, his prejudices to an abusing parental figure, or his baser proclivities to some ethnic or cultural default. His mindset resembled Mussolini or Stalin when they spoke to large assemblies, watching endless reviews of impressive weaponry parade by. He felt like a famous and incalculably rich singer as the crowds of thousands screamed and applauded. It was complete intoxication,



like the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, from a prophetic verse in the Apocalypse of St. John. Hernández was indeed practically that evil.

In the deep canyons and wide vistas of spiritual realities, he was captive to a deluded state which he did not perceive. He was spiritually blind and that grand scientific mind was not possessed of any degree of self-awareness in the introspective and reflective ways that Christians sometimes regularly possessed, indwelt as they were with the Holy Spirit.

He was full of glee at his latest T-beaming of five deluded American souls. He remembered a photo he had once seen of Heinrich Himmler, with a slight smirk on his face as he toured Dachau. He did not know that only the apparel of his victims floated inside the orbital structure. As elegant and sophisticated as was his *reestruturação plasmatizada,* the Amazônia-1 wasn't equipped with any interrogative surveillance capabilities of its own. It had simply not occurred to its designers or even to Hernández that any would be needed. The Brazilian satellite appeared as it had been publicly displayed, not visible of observable oddities, politically sovereign. With as many satellites in orbit now as there were, Brazil added their own to the long trajectorial march.

*A spiritually dark clicking sound echoed briefly through that immediate region of the spiritual realm. The Archas had arrived in proximity and while not typically attentive to individual humans, the professor gained its interest. Almost always it was at the service of an even higher evil entity, as its strategic logistician. This human, though, was particularly gratifying to the creature. The Archas observed through what humans might take to be eyes—hideous, black, and empty. Elect angels did not dispute this thing; if they encountered it, which was unusual, they simply invoked the Lord's name. And on this dark evening, and through its seeing-holes, six of them, the ancient being could see Professor Hernández and wished a double malevolence, parsed by a peculiar calculus, here—success for the professor's plots and a hideous curse-like plea for the professor's own complete destruction after, at a befitting time.*

* * * * *

André Ferreira had no problem overriding the security protocols to gain admittance into the professor's office suite. So here he was—where he needed to be in order

to obtain what was necessary to counteract the diabolical stratagem of who was his mentor, at least in physics.

He wore a pair of night-vision goggles, plastic gloves, and soft-soled slippers. He was in no hurry but he wanted to accomplish his mission as quickly as possible. As he surveyed the professor's office equipment and the few documents that were on the man's desk, he took pictures with his low-light phone camera of everything he found. He did not know about the iPad. He looked around again to see if there were any security cameras that could provide evidence. He had a plan to disable them.

Ferreira sat in the desk chair, and looked everywhere on top of, underneath and around the desk to see if any security device was visible. He could detect none.

He intended to steal nothing, of course, but he intended to carefully photograph everything that he could and in the shortest time possible. Taking phone pictures while wearing night vision goggles was something of a challenge but he mastered the task quickly. He took pictures of everything on the professor's desk, on his walls—which included some framed diagrams—and each shelf on the bookshelves. He tried the desk drawers, which were locked. He carefully picked the locks on each one, slowly opened them, and determined there were no electronic alarms on the desk drawers.

In the main drawer, there was an iPad. He looked at it carefully to see if it was connected to anything and it was not. He took it out and switched it on. The screen asked for a password. He tried a couple of combinations and after three, he hit on one. Apparently, the professor was brilliant at physics applications but not too astute at cybersecurity. The Air Force captain had given him a list of words that might be part of the professor's repertoire. The password was completely predictable. The air cadet was in.

There were various icons. One was interesting. It was a small picture of an Amazônia-1 satellite. The cadet touched it and a complex menu system appeared. The iPad was fast. He made pictures of every menu and submenu, scanned the other icons, and took a picture of the main menu.

Then he did something that was his crown jewel of the evening. He connected a high-capacity thumb drive and began downloading the entire contents. He had



been told by his uncle that with this special thumb drive, no trace would be left of any tampering. The download took five minutes. He looked and listened. He was still wearing his NVGs. No disturbances. All was quiet. The thumb drive was back in his pocket, the iPad gingerly placed back in the drawer, drawer closed, all surfaces wiped of any residue of anything. With a special device he relocked each drawer.

As he went to the door, he took out a small cigar, carefully lit it, puffed several times, and blew the whiffs around the office. It was the professor's favorite cigar, the aroma sweetly pungent. "What a clever fellow I am," he thought as he closed the door quietly behind himself, reset the alarm and walked down the hallway to the lounge on that floor. There were two students studying, whom he avoided, acting as nonchalantly as he could. He did not want to be remembered as having been there that evening. They were both deeply comatose in their studies.

It seemed like the raid could not have gone more smoothly. The cadet left the building, called a taxi, and rode to yet another non-descript café where the Brazilian Air Force captain was waiting for him. He sat down in the booth—a steaming cup of hot chocolate awaited him. He smiled and from the Brazilian national anthem, he sang very quietly to his uncle,

> *Terra adorada, Entre outras mil, És tu, Brasil,*
> *Ó Pátria amada!*
>
> Land adored among a thousand others, art Thou Brasil—O beloved homeland!

And the captain smiled and replied,

> *Dos filhos deste solo és mãe gentil, Pátria amada, Brasil!*
>
> Of the sons of this ground, Thou art kind mother Beloved homeland, Brazil!

The captain noticed that the young man had a beautiful singing voice. He thought to himself that he would love to hear his nephew sing someday, in a more relaxed setting.

Their meeting did not last long. Ferreira slid the phone and the thumb drive across the table to the captain, who placed them in a leather pouch, and said, “Good night, Air cadet,” and slipped out the door.

*One of Kuriosagapa’s friends was watching and had been throughout the evening. He had made sure that the cadet was unimpeded, at least by demons. The angel watched the captain depart and placed himself over the young cadet as he relaxed and savored his hot chocolate.*

* * * * *

Professor Hernández sat in his office the next morning, smiling. He was charmed that his office still smelled of his favorite cigar, and passively, briefly, thought, *how can that be? I haven’t been here for two days.* He shrugged it off, and lit up a fresh one, unlocking his desk and pulling out the special iPad. He turned it on, entered his password and accessed the satellite. He never ceased to be fascinated at his own brilliance, cleverness, and the audacity of doing what he now loved to do.

He had decided, with no consultation with anyone else, that he would next target the Santa Maria Chapel in Santa Fe, where he had learned that Christians—not Catholics—were known to congregate on some Sundays. “I will deal a noble blow now for the cause of science,” and he chuckled. He did mean it. He was not speaking to himself facetiously. He wanted to make a whole community of worshipping faith-people disappear. His hatred for them—although he knew none of them personally—was in full bloom. He still maintained the façade that he was Catholic. He had no reason to officially repudiate that faith with which he had been raised. And in some strange way, he didn’t really mind what he had been taught. He had come to believe that they, at least, knew how to mute a faith’s fervency, temper it with long history, nuance it with lots of rituals and traditions and curb any confrontations with evolutionary thinking. He didn’t care about other Catholic issues that were sacrosanct—the sanctity of life, traditional gender matters, sexuality, economics, liberation, to name a few. None of them mattered to him. It was the fundamentalist Protestants that deserved, in his estimation, whatever exterminations he could engineer. Along with any Jews who might cross his path while he was at it.



He looked at the clock on his wall. São Paulo was three hours ahead of Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA. He had been told by Heather Marcos that for three weeks she had understood that one of the fundamentalist churches was meeting at Santa Maria Chapel at noon on Sundays, three hours from now. He made his plan and entered the coordinates into the iPad.

* * * * *

Father Frank had finished his ten o’clock Mass, bid his parishioners good-bye at the door, and retired to his study for a cup of coffee before the twenty or so worshippers of the Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church arrived. They had loaned their own small building to one of the Hit-G churches for three weeks in a noble gesture of solidarity and didn’t really mind utilizing a Catholic church, short-term. On this day, the weather was gorgeous and as they began to arrive their pastor thought to have them worship outside. There was really no reason to do this but the weather was beautiful, there was no wind, and it seemed to him that it might be a fun change of pace, just for today. The OPC churches were not generally thought of as being flexible in this way, but the pastor thought a change of routine can be healthy from time to time. The priest was fine with that and invited them to bring out some chairs that were stacked in the small fellowship hall.

He stood near the back as their service commenced at noon outside with a hymn that he not only knew but really liked, “For All the Saints.” The group was singing *a capella* and it was quite stirring. He had a tear in his eye as the small chorus of Presbyterians sang,

> *Thou wast their Rock, their Fortress and their Might;*
> *Thou, Lord, their Captain in the well fought fight;*
> *Thou, in the darkness drear, their one true Light.*
> *Alleluia, Alleluia!*

But at 11:10 a.m. something very strange happened. The gathering was about thirty feet away from the chapel, and the priest had stepped a few feet outside of the main door towards the congregation when suddenly the roof of the chapel began to glow. A sound like a buzz with clicking could be heard although it was not loud. The priest stepped further away and looked up. The roof was glowing in a bluish haze and then in an instant, it was gone. The people gathered were also stunned,

and yet everyone seemed to have an immediate understanding of what had happened.

The priest said out loud, “Santa Maria, protect us.” The Presbyterian pastor walked over to him, warmly put his hand on the priest’s shoulder and said, “Oh, my friend.”

Father Portacomaro stared. “Even if I knew this was coming, I would not have been prepared,” was all he could say.

“I think we know what has happened,” the pastor said. “But why only the roof?”

The priest said nothing, took out his cell phone and texted Father Marty Clark and then Bob Cohen: **Santa Maria roof gone, beamed out. Can you come?** Both texted in the affirmative. Cohen was there in ten minutes and the other priest in fifteen. The Presbyterian church attenders were in disarray and their pastor suggested they cancel their service, for which they were grateful. There was nothing to do anyway. The old Catholic church’s roof was gone—as if it had been surgically removed.

Cohen walked around with the priests, but there was not much to say. The fact that only the roof was gone, and no people had been killed baffled them all. Plasmatized restructuring in any form, was a sight to behold when it occurred. Cohen, from his phone, put the event on his website and called Mindy McConnell so that she would have the scoop first, for the general media community. She asked, “Why just the roof?” but of course Cohen had no answer for that. The building had been empty so it was a tragic loss of a historic building, but as the recent Montecito Center event had so tragically demonstrated, it could have been much worse.

Cohen said to Father Portacomaro, “Welcome to the club.” The priest didn’t laugh but conceded the new reality. Apparently Catholic churches were no longer exempt from this thing. Also then, Heather Marcos saw the Santa Fe Day news item with a photo of a roofless Catholic church, but with no casualties, and was puzzled. Governor Grimly was also informed of the event on this beautiful Sunday morning.

* * * * *

The professor was over five thousand miles away but he and Francis Xappa learned of the casualty-free news item via an encrypted email from their female co-



conspirator in Santa Fe. Xappa was mildly annoyed. *A technical glitch probably,* he thought and returned to his late breakfast. The professor, however, was feeling something different. The failure to exterminate anyone, with only a transported roof achieved, baffled him. It was now ten o’clock in São Paulo on a Sunday morning, and he was trying to figure out what went wrong. The split focused beam array and the Amazônia-1 had functioned flawlessly to this point. What was different? He ran a diagnostic program on the iPad, and its computer server. Nothing looked awry.

“Wait,” he said, “There has been a usage event logged in the middle of the night.” Hernández fell back into his leather desk chair, startled. “Could my iPad have somehow accidentally turned itself on? I do not think so,” he thought. The Physics Department in the *Edifício de Física* of the University of São Paulo had not yet built a zero-trust architecture into their network nor instituted it into their anti-hacking philosophy. No one in that department had yet imagined that such an evolution of security protocols would be necessary. Surely a “cathedral of holy knowledge,” as the university weekly newspaper had recently sainted the Physics Department, would be treated and respected as a sanctuary of unassailable trust. Physics, even more so than chemistry, geology, or other scientific pursuits, owned a sacred status. Didn’t it? Who would profane this highest form of human knowledge by breaching its halls of learning? These thoughts had never been discussed in any policy meeting or committee deliberations. They were assumed. And surely the professor was the Cardinal of Holy Knowledge. For anyone to burglarize the Cardinal’s inner sanctum, well, that is unthinkable. *¡Correcto!*

But André Ferreira had not considered that simply turning on a device, including this iPad, with seemingly insignificant plasmatization commands, would log a record of access. The professor remembered that he had no high security devices or assets of any kind in his office, but he recalled a single security camera in the lounge.

He went to the office where he knew the security computer was kept, asked the on-duty guard if he could check for any overnight intrusions, and waited. The guard came back to him and reported that yes, there had been an entry overnight. Hernández asked if he could view the video record and was invited into the security office as the guard ran the file.

The lounge had two students, immersed in their laptops and then, one other figure walked past during the hours in question. The passerby wore a wide-brimmed fedora and kept his head down so that his face could not be seen. He was dressed in dark clothing and carried a backpack over one shoulder. This must be the intruder. The professor asked the guard to run the file back and play it again. There was nothing unusual about the passing walker that he could see. Hernández decided not to pursue it officially or get the guard to record any off-hours entry violation into his office, but he asked the guard to email him the file. Professor Hernández thanked the guard and said in a matter-of-fact way, “It’s probably nothing,” and returned to his office.

The guard however, seeing this as the only even slightly interesting thing to have happened on this whole shift decided to let his supervisor know of the professor’s inquiry. The university watch commander thought it interesting and asked to see the file. He said, “That is André Ferreira. I know his walk. He always has a kind of dancing to his gate.” The watch commander also knew that reported improprieties by an air cadet could get the cadet dismissed from the program, so he decided to tread lightly regarding this highly regarded future officer. He decided to e-mail the cadet and ask to talk to him privately.

* * * * *

Ferreira received the email from the watch commander and immediately sensed that he had been detected. He decided to act innocent and test his own capacity to be duplicitous.

That morning he went by the watch commander’s office, found him to be there and said, “Did you need to see me, sir?” with his best slightly afraid voice.

“Yes, André,” and the officer closed the door halfway.

“You were here, in the building in the middle of the night, last night. It looks like you in the security record,” he said.

“Yes sir, I was indeed. I am embarrassed to admit that I left my laptop in my carrell, still on and right out in the open. I know this is wrong, and I am sorry. I came back to get it.” He looked at the floor.



“I see,” said the officer. “Yes, that is a violation of policy, especially for an air cadet. Do you know what information could be obtained on any air cadet’s device?” He was acting slightly outraged. “Also, Professor Hernández thinks someone was in his office, after hours without authorization. That would be a reportable offense. I believe the penalty is thirty *deméritos*, from which few cadets can recover.”

Ferreira played his best hand. He stood up, shocked, and then sat back down. Melodrama sometimes has a use. “What? I was here, sir, yes, as I said. I do not think I went anywhere near the professor’s suite. I stopped by the restroom very briefly. Other than that, I retrieved my equipment, which appeared undisturbed, and went home.” He was acting very alarmed.

“Alright, André, I had to check on this. You are a hard-working cadet, and until now above reproach. I trust you will be more careful from now on. I hope to hear you are flying Gripens before too long,” and he smiled. The cadet stood to attention and said, “Thank you, sir,” bowed slightly and dismissed himself.

The watch officer wrote in his logbook that he had briefly interviewed the cadet on a minor and insignificant lapse of protocol, issued a warning and that there was no more to be said of it. He sat back and sighed. “Such a fine young man,” he thought and went back to viewing a video about the Amazon—the river, not the satellite.

* * * * *

As Amazônia-1 neared the space neighborhood its sixty-five-meter resolution optical imager captured the orbiting eighteen churches, two synagogues, one individual home, a partial community center, and Gripen fighter—and now it viewed a new addition to the collection. Oddly, it was just a roof, with no other part of a structure—a cleanly excised roof. Even now it was beginning to come apart with single tiles floating in syncopation to the rest. Professor Hernández was puzzled. He was watching his transported neighborhood mock the mystification of the former owners by way of a partial transfer. A roof. He stared at his iPad in fascination. He ran a full diagnostic check of both the iPad and its base station computer. No malfunctions or software corruption of any kind were detected, but something interfered with the transfer. He was befuddled.

In Ogden, Utah, Francis Xappa was working on a fresh tax liability, “righting a wrong,” as he called it. It was his conviction that churches and similar religious bodies had no inherent constitutional privilege of exemption from being taxed as are most other businesses. This was, as Xappa felt, especially true for organizations which possessed no tangible property, i.e., the Hit-G churches. That this had become the feature of twenty distinctly evangelical organizations in one place, and that this had been the plasmatized-restructuring target of his close associate, the good Professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD, was in no way relevant to his own ideas of justice.

He engaged this debate in his mind often and now decided to resume his plan to start the process of disciplining these upstart and arrogant organizations with notification to appropriately initiate at a modest pace, a fair and balanced commencement of revenue assessment with suitably eligible religious organizations, bringing a new equitability and public benefit support. He knew he could not tell certain churches that taxation, or revocation of tax-exempt status was imminent, but that is exactly what he intended to do. *Why not begin,* he thought to himself, *with the Hit-G churches?*

*As Xappa typed the memo for administrative distribution to the pastors and other church leaders in Santa Fe, Screegion hmphed in affirmation. And if demons could smile, this would have prompted an evil grin. Of course, the thought had originated from it.*

What neither the professor nor Xappa knew was that Jim Pappas was clued in. He and the Utah State Trooper Jessica Young had managed a very deft and full-blown wiretap on the IRS worker’s main computer. This was no small feat, as IRS internal security had become especially adroit at evading hacking. But hacked he had been and now Pappas and Young could monitor any outgoing emails or internal electronic messaging from the single terminal. They saw this draft notification, and Pappas immediately called Governor Grimley and requested a historic preservation briefing for her.



They met on the outside balcony the next morning. Bill and Carlos had quietly swept the balcony earlier for any electronic foolishness that might have been slipped on to it recently. There was none they could detect.

Pappas sat at the small bistro table on the balcony, poured himself a cup of excellent Honduran coffee, added cream and sugar and sat back, waiting for Madam Governor. He picked up the cardboard placard, felt for any small lumps. He was getting sensitive, maybe paranoid about such tactics by now.

Governor Grimley came out, poured herself a cup and sat down. “Good morning, Jim. I hope you like this flavor of coffee. It is a little fruity but has a slight chocolate aspect too. I’ve become quite fond of it.”

“Yes ma’am, it is delicious and thank you for your hospitality. I have a new revelation for you today, in our ongoing reconnaissance of the Ogden connection.” Pappas handed her a copy of a memo authored by Francis Xappa, Supervisory Revenue Officer. The governor read it, frowned, folded it once and handed it back to Pappas.

Pappas went on. “The gentleman has already forwarded this communication to his partners and has received approval, though the replies were very brief.”

“Indeed? And they were what?” asked the governor.

“*Sim bom*, which is ‘yes, good’ from the South American comrade and ‘*sim*’ from the local partner. This attack, I think we can call it, on the Cavern Fellowships is underway,” Pappas elaborated. Their voices were quiet and this might have been a good thing because at that moment Heather Marcos came out onto the balcony, waved through by Bill. He was certainly aware of her felonious involvement in things, but they had all agreed that behavior around her should be relaxed and routine at all times.

She excused her interruption to Grimley and smiled embarrassingly at Pappas, and said, “Forgive my rudeness Madam Governor but I need your signature for this purchase order for a network server array for this floor. We spoke of it last week?”

She handed the governor a form, which Grimley signed and smiled and said, “Yes Heather, of course. Keep me posted when it is installed and operating.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all Marcos said, took the form and exited the balcony. Pappas could not restrain a raised eyebrow, making eye contact with Grimley who just smiled.

“We must keep current with the administrative proclivities of the staff,” she said in mock prudish accent.

“Of course, ma’am,” was all Pappas could say, and looked around to make sure they were alone again.

“Jim, this conspiracy is gaining speed and horsepower. That notification will no doubt reach at least some of the church leaders soon. I wish to stop it cold in its tracks but I don’t want to compromise our counter-conspiracy efforts too soon by tipping them off,” she said.

Pappas changed the subject. “You’re aware, I assume, of the Saint Mary’s Chapel losing its head, so to speak.”

She coughed a laugh, and said, “Yes, I am, and no, it is not funny. I hadn’t heard it referred to in that way. And what a strange thing. Why only the roof? And fortunately, no people were abducted.”

Pappas went on again, “Our Santa Fe Day associate has learned from his air force connections,” Captain Philipsburg and his friend *Capitão da Força Aérea* Breno Lucas, “that the recent beaming was impeded by some unknown force. It is still a mystery but apparently, some guardian angel intervened,” and was immediately embarrassed that he used that metaphor.

Now it was the governor’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “Indeed, Mr. Pappas? That is a fortuitous intervention. I wonder how we can employ this guardian in future deployments of this technology?”

Pappas chuckled. “I wish I knew, Lucy,” surprised that he let himself call by her first name. There was a warrior camaraderie now among all on the governor’s team.



They were working on a clandestine counter-terrorism mission and never felt more engaged with something so meaningful. The governor was still steamed about the five Montecito deaths. There would somehow be retribution for that.

“As to getting out in front of protecting the churches from this memo’s intent, may I suggest that we carefully tell the pastors to simply ignore it, without saying why. My sense is that this whole thing is going to come to a head soon,” he said.

“Jim, I can agree with that in principle. How do we do that below the radar?” she asked.

“If you will allow me to take responsibility for that, I think it can be done in short order through the network.” He coughed again and looked at the door. “I should be careful with that word.”

“No problem, Mr. Pappas. Please keep me appraised of things and we will *kibbutz* again soon. I must be off to another meeting but please enjoy the coffee as long as you wish.” Pappas filled a to-go cup for the road.

* * * * *

Karen Asnat had taken up running. Staring at the written word all day as an editor was starting to get to her. She needed exercise, so she looked online for good running shoes, ordered a pair, and began to walk fast, then slowly jog. She was not a big woman and so it wasn’t about getting less big. It was about developing a discipline that would blow the cobwebs out of her brain in between long reading and editing sessions. Santa Fe’s climate was good for this, and since she had been exercising now for about three months, the regimen was beginning to be enjoyable. She also liked to jog on different routes.

One of her routes took her by the Hit-G hole that was New Beginnings Christian Fellowship. She was always nervous when she ran by that location because of the light incident in the hole. At the same time, she felt a warmth there. On this day, she ran up to the hole itself. It looked no different. As the breeze blew, bits of debris flew by, pieces of twigs, a few leaves, the odd plastic bag. But as she looked down into the hole, nothing seemed to have blown into it. It lay completely empty, much like when she had first seen it. Again, none of the walls had collapsed or

deteriorated in any way that she could see. It was like this hole had been carved out and preserved for some purpose. *I'm really starting to lose it,* she thought. But she stood still and peered in. She also had a strange feeling that she was not alone.

Then a dark purple SUV approached and she wasn't alone. Three men got out, all wearing black and hooded. She froze. One came up to her, and the other two stayed by the vehicle.

*Screegion was there too, above the SUV, motionless.*

"What are you doing here, Ms. Asnat?" the male said.

"Do I know you, sir?" she said, fearful.

"You do not and please answer my question, Jewess," the man replied. Karen's fear doubled at that designation.

"I was running . . . and stopped by to look into the hole," was all she could say.

"Then take your silly peek and be off with you," the voice behind the hood said. "And tell your friends that they are all being watched."

Suddenly, from behind Karen, a glow flashed and almost burned the three men. They cowered and fell to the ground. Karen only felt warmth on her back and stood still. She heard a noise but could not tell what it was except that it was like music and words that she could not quite make out, like being in a rock festival and being at the rear of the crowd.

*The three men could understand the noise plainly. It was a holy voice—the kind Screegion hated—and it said, "Beware whom you assail, Demônios members. Beware. The King will not tarry with you for long."*

*Screegion also was scorched by the brightness. It evaporated itself.*

Oddly, Karen thought of the terrifying scene in *The Terminator* when the nuclear explosion occurs and people are vaporized. She was terrified. The men stumbled



into their vehicle and sped off. All was quiet again and the breeze was gently blowing.

Karen was completely petrified. She slowly peeked over her shoulder, and then turned around. Standing there was an angel, not Kuriosagapa but another. He was aglow, but not blazing. The light did not hurt her eyes but seemed to infuse peace on her. She looked into his eyes and they were beautiful. And they looked at her, unblinking, in what she felt was pure love. She relaxed and he looked at her, motionless but said nothing. He was not as tall as Kuriosagapa, but taller than her. He then raised a hand and said, "Peace Karen, from your Redeemer, and farewell." And he was gone.

Karen fell to her knees and wept. All was quiet except the gentle sound of the wind on the mesa.

* * * * *

Alejandro Martinez did not understand what had happened with the American girl but he did not like it. Neither did his two companions. Even though they had been hooded and their limbs covered, somehow each were pained with what was like sun poisoning. Their skin on the front of their bodies stung and was fully blistered on all three men. They had driven in silence to their safehouse, struggled into the living room and gingerly took off their hoodies and sweatpants, down to their shorts. They looked each other over, inspecting the blisters and the reddened skin.

*"Qué diablos pasó?"* one asked.

Alejandro said, "I do not know, friend, but it is something to be avoided in the future, *si*?" Both others grunted in the affirmative.

"We must report this to our area manager," he dialed up a number on his new iPhone, but nothing happened. He looked carefully at it and it appeared to be working, but the number would not connect. Then an icon appeared of an angel. It looked out of the phone directly at Alejandro, in a way that he had never experienced from an image on his phone, like a facetime connection. The image did not speak and then disappeared, leaving his home screen as normal. This

unnerved him. He tried again to make the call but it would not connect to his *Demônios* superior. He threw the cell phone on the couch and sat down.

Alejandro had attended and graduated from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. He had majored in English and was quite proud to have graduated with a high grade point average. He loved his studies and had dreamed of becoming an instructor in literature and perhaps someday, a professor. But he had been cleverly recruited by the *Demônios Elevados* on the third day after graduation, almost like clockwork. He had been targeted by an operative there for some time. The seemingly legitimate offer for a position with a business whose calling card named Future Endeavor was compelling for its beginning salary and the benefits promised, though the company name struck him as bland. When he realized he was being headhunted by a notorious organized-crime organization, he was already roped in. He was told that his younger sister in Mexico was very attractive, that his mama sold very nice clothing in her shop, and would it not be a shame if something terrible happened to them, by accident, of course? That had been two years earlier and now he was twenty-four years old.

* * * * *

When Karen Asnat arrived back at her apartment she called Jim Pappas, told him of her encounter at the New Beginnings site, and asked him what she should do. He told her to sit tight and he would call Bob Cohen.

“Bob, Karen was just accosted at one of the holes. Three men approached her and told her that we are all being watched. What do you think we should do?” he asked.

Bob Cohen had been at the firing range with Mindy McConnell and they were both at his RV cleaning their weapons.

“Let me think, Jim. I’ll call you back later. Stay home and stand by,” he said.

Cohen told McConnell who got up and said, “Dammit. I’m getting tired of this.”

He said, “Yeah, me too. I want to do news, manage my site, and be with . . .”

“With whom?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.



“Well, you see, there’s this hot, gun-toting news chick I know. And she likes me, for some reason. I want to be with her, lots of the time. I don’t want to waste my time and energy on these *Demônios* ass . . . um, fellows,” and smiled. She went over to him, grabbed his head, and kissed his forehead. “Tell her I said hello,” and went back to cleaning the barrel and slide on her Baretta 9mm.

“We’re all being watched, eh? Let them watch, and let them come,” he said. “I have an idea. I’ll be gone for a couple of hours. Stay here if you want, darlin’ but keep your eye on the camera feed,” motioning towards his computer monitor.

He went out to the far side of the RV and reached underneath the bottom at a small opening. He pulled out a beat-up Pennzoil carton and carried it to his Jeep where he placed it in the front seat, looking around to see if he could spot any watchers. He saw none. He got into the Jeep, closed the door, and placed two items from the box into a seabag. Then he drove to a grocery store, purchased most of their supply of baby wipes, exited and placed them in another seabag in the Jeep. He drove to the Hit-G site for the Southwest Evangelical Free Church. He was hoping to be spotted there, and sure enough he had been followed by a white Ford Transit van with darkened windows. When he stopped at the Hit-G site, it turned off the road and moved out of view. Then he could see its roof as it parked below a small rise. He was clearly being observed.

He took out a shovel, quickly dug about a three-by-three hole, about fifteen feet from the Hit-G. He very obviously placed the cartons of baby wipes into the hole. He thought that whoever was watching him would think that he thought that he was being clever. Who would bury drugs next to one of the Hit-G sites? Then very quickly Cohen pulled the other seabag out, placed it into the hole and took out the two items. He threw the seabag to one side, manipulated the two items in the hole with a booby trap trigger which, in combat, was called an area denial system. He covered it over with dirt and looked around, though not towards the place where the Transit was sitting. Along with the baby-wipes, which were supposed to look like small cartons of fentanyl, were two active Claymore mines. He chirped to himself, “FRONT TOWARD ENEMY” which was written on the front panel of the Claymores. Each had a fifteen-minute timer before activation.

* * * * *

Two more *Demônios* operatives watching Cohen were young. They assumed he was unaware of them and were watching him through binoculars at the hole he dug. They called themselves *Observadores do morass,* walrus-watchers. They amused themselves by referring to their reconnaissance assignment, the former U.S. Navy SEAL, as a walrus.

"*Morsas* thinks he's being clever," the one said to the other.

"We will relieve him of his *bebé*-wipe cleverness, *amigo*!" and they both laughed. "He should stay out of our line of business."

Cohen had driven off and the Transit remained there for thirty minutes. Then the two men pulled on hoodies. They each had a small shovel and quickly dug up what Cohen had buried. As they scraped off the last clots of dirt, there lay two seabags. One of them pulled out the first, opened it and there was a huge explosion, instantly killing both men. The M-18 Claymore directional fragmentation mine contained seven hundred steel spheres, a one-and-a-half-pound layer of C-4 explosive, and an electric blasting cap. And there were two of them. Cohen had rigged them to detonate upon handling and they were both pointed towards the two treasure hunters. Each man's head, neck and shoulders were immediately blown apart and their trunks were riddled and blown backwards. The Claymore had a fifty-meter killing zone and these two young men were dead. The blast had blown out a gradually inclining rough excavation for about thirty yards, in one direction, which was away from the Hit-G.

The white Ford Transit sat running until it ran out of gas.

*Screegion was not there exactly, but instantly knew that two young humans had died. It muttered, "finally, two more for the Power Prince."*

Avon Duvall was on duty and received a call from dispatch ten minutes later to investigate a 911 call that there had been an explosion at the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship hole in the ground. He drove there, was first to arrive, and found a smoking hole a few yards away from the Hit-G. There was human debris around, and two decimated corpses, or at least the lower halves. "Oh my," was all he said out loud. It struck him to text Cohen immediately, which he did.



**On my way,** Cohen texted back. When he arrived and surveyed the scene with the state trooper, he was surprisingly unimpressed and cool, or so the trooper surmised.

"You seem unmoved at whatever this was, Bob," Duvall commented.

"Looks like these two *hombres* got blowed up, officer," he dryly noted. "Wonder what happened?" Cohen replied and shrugged. He had never told anyone except Mindy about the Claymores.

"Did you notice that the blast pattern goes away from the church's hole?" Duvall asked the journalist. "And what are these little bits of wet paper all over the place? They smell like baby-wipes," as he held a little wad up to his nose and offered one to Cohen.

"Yup," Cohen agreed. "Hey, didn't I read that traffickers are bringing in fentanyl now hidden in baby-wipes cartons?"

"You're right, Bob. Quick Draw McGraw, you are. I had not thought of that. But why would traffickers bury a cache here, and why would it blow up?" the officer asked. He was processing the grisly scene and noted a new Ford Transit over the rise, no registration and unoccupied. Looked like it ran out of gas.

"Interesting," Cohen answered. "Maybe someone saw the drugs get buried and wanted to steal them? Maybe the lab will find traces of the drug, too. Or maybe these guys were burying the stuff" He had actually planted two small samples of fentanyl in two of the baby-wipes boxes.

"One other thing, Bob. There's a bunch of these little steel balls. Seems like the blast blew them away from this carve-out. Almost looks like an IED of some kind." He handed the SEAL three little spheres and studied Cohen for a reaction. None was forthcoming.

"Again, officer, interesting. That is what a Claymore mine would do, I think, and these are the sort of pieces that would have been inside of a Claymore. Of course,

it's been a long time since I was around any. That's what I would guess though," and he smiled. "I don't see them in my AARP meetings," he snarked.

"Right," the officer said, and left it alone. He had a report to write and they were still awaiting arrival of the medical examiner. Not that there was much to examine. When photographed and cataloged, what was left would be bagged and taken to the morgue. Two detectives went through the van and their sweep yielded fingerprints aplenty. A topless soda can was also retrieved, that had what looked like spit in it, smelling of tobacco. Apparently one of the inhabitants chewed tobacco. The DNA could be identified soon and compared with the human debris of the two corpses.

With his camera phone, Cohen took a couple of pictures and drove back to his RV. Mindy was gone, so he uploaded a story to his Santa Fe Day site, proud that he was the first to scoop the story. He left out that he contrived the story. He drank four beers, alone. And fell asleep.

* * * * *

Karen Asnat had gone to Jim Pappas's apartment and they waited to hear from Cohen, who never called back. They looked at Santa Fe Day and saw his report, written in a very dispassionate way.

"Hmm . . .," came out of Pappas's mouth. The story told of an explosion next to the New Beginnings Hit-G site. Two people were killed, no gender given. A state police investigation was commencing and that was it.

Karen was troubled. "There were three men who had driven up when I was there," she said, "And their vehicle was not a white van. It was dark colored."

"Okay, the man said we are all being watched. So, if Cohen was being watched it was probably by another team, don't you think?" Jim posited.

"Maybe so, Jim. When will this end?" exasperated, she fell into his arms.

"I do not know, but we have positive forces in our camp, don't we?" and he smiled. He was thinking that maybe he had a watching angel too.



Karen had tears in her eyes and fell asleep in his grasp. He let her sit there for a long time in his arms, and he prayed.

* * * * *

It was cold the next morning when Karen's cell phone chirped. It was Mindy McConnell.

"Good morning, Karen. I am sorry for calling this early. Did you hear from Bob last night? He told me about your encounter and then left, said he would be back. I went home and haven't heard from him."

"No, I have not seen him. Nor has Jim, to my knowledge. Are you worried?" she asked.

"With Bob one never knows what he's up to, do we? and she laughed. "I'm going to run over there in a few. Thanks." She hung up and got in her car and drove to his RV. It was still early when she got there. She walked to the door, knocked, and called out for Bob.

The door opened and Bob looked at her smiling. "Hello little lady. Come on in."

"You didn't answer my calls last night, where were you?" she asked in her best CNN voice. She also noticed a bunch of empty beer cans. "Oh, I see," and she gestured toward the overflowing trash can.

"Uh. Well, I had a few I guess," he said.

"I guess. And you didn't save one for me?" she added.

He sat down in his chair, looking dazed. "Mindy. I killed two guys last night, or I set it up for them to kill themselves."

Having learned not to entrust such conversations to interior spaces, she said, "Put your coat on and come with me." Which he did.

They drove to Alamos Brew, bought coffees, and sat down. “Now,” she said. “What the hell did you do?” He had been silent on the drive over.

He said, “That explosion that I put on my site, over at the Free Church,” then he told her the whole story. She could tell it was no small thing to him, and she was glad about that.

“Bob, I think that was probably a crime of some kind,” she commented.

“Yeah, I’m sure it was. But hey, I didn’t make them dig up the hole. And I didn’t make them follow me. And I am sure the investigation will discover their organizational membership. But I feel like crap. I think they were young, and I never get used to young people getting fragged.” Then Cohen looked at her and very intently said, “But we are at war and we didn’t start it.”

She looked at the floor. She had killed people too although not with quite the aplomb of Cohen, but this brought all that back. And she could not sit in judgment at all. But what do they do now? They sat for an hour. And they decided to let it lie and let the chips fall as they might. She took him back to his RV and drank the one beer that was left in the refrigerator remarking, “You had your share last night.”

* * * * *

Heather Marcos saw the Santa Fe Day story too. Since it was posted by Bob Cohen, it did not occur to her that he had anything to do with it. That part of his stealth worked. But she was feeling increasingly nervous about being so close to those who very probably did have something to do with it—the governor’s office. She was emotionally spent, for the long-term duplicity she was practicing. Somehow, a change had to be coming. She didn’t know what. She decided to call her cousin, arrange for coffee, and see if being with her would clear her mind. She called Julianna Namara, offered to pick her up and take her to coffee that afternoon. Julianna was delighted to hear from her successful cousin and said she would meet her at the corner where she now lived. For a few minutes, Heather’s mind was already clearer.

* * * * *



Over coffee, the two chatted happily. Mainly, Julianna spoke of what she hoped would be her escape from the world in which she had lived, her exfiltration. The former prostitute talked about her new friends with a warmth and trust that seemed alien to the network administrator/*Demônios* agent. There was absolutely no one in her life who could be compared to Sally, and the other church friends that Julianna was now close with. However, the new escapee was not naive. She told her cousin that she knew her old employers continued to watch her and she fatalistically accepted that at any moment her life could be snuffed out.

“If anyone comes at you at all, dear, you tell me,” Heather said with a ferocity that was off-putting to Julianna.

“*Prima,* you do not understand these people. They are *despiadado,*” ruthless, she said, in her own cold voice.

“I know more than you know, Julianna,” said Heather quietly. This meeting was not clearing her head the way she had hoped.

Julianna looked at her hard and said, “I need to go home now.”

Heather consented, and they exited the coffee shop. As they did, Heather instinctively scanned the area. She spotted a parked SUV, which began to come towards them as they walked down the sidewalk. Julianna was chatting, but then the car pulled up next to them and a man got out.

Alejandro Martinez spoke to Julianna, “Hello little darlin, where have you been?”

Heather stepped in between them and said, “*Hola* Alejandro, I’ve been where I always am, and if I may say, your suntan is particularly sparkling.” He did not recognize her at first, but then moved back one step.

“I was speaking to your friend,” the man said, confused.

“Do you two know each other?” asked Julianna?

Heather took charge. “Yes, we do, we have had some business dealings in the past. Alejandro, our contractual relationships are done. Or did you not know that?”

The man said, “My business is with your friend here and has nothing to do with you,” and he pulled his jacket aside to partially reveal a Ruger American Pistol, in a black holster.

Heather was not intimidated at all. “This is my cousin and she has chosen a new and exciting line of work. Perhaps you could congratulate her and do her the courtesy of informing her former employers that she has transferred to a new company?” The man backed off briefly, and she added, “I’m sure you know the late Mr. Hernandez’s new replacement. He authorized the transfer, you know.” She was referring to the late Julio Hernandez, art dealer.

“That is not so easy. One does not transfer from one department to another on a whim,” he objected with authority.

“It is not a whim, Alejandro, it is a lateral move.” She stood her ground, stared at him with a beautiful terror. He backed down. Julianna was motionless.

He moved to leave and said, “Dear, if you ever need a reference for future employment, let me know.” He sighed and walked off, figuring Julianna was not worth the trouble.

Heather dropped Julianna off at her place, kissed her on the cheek and wished her well. Julianna was moved at the encounter and thanked her cousin for the advocacy. She was not naïve, but she thought that maybe a new life was possible. Her new faith was in her mind, too. And although she did not ask, she could not help but wonder how her cousin knew Mr. Martinez?

* * * * *

The DNA testing of the two men’s remains did indeed match that of the material and prints found in the Ford van. Also in the van were documents which identified these dead man as having been part of the *Demônios Elevados*. They were not documents of an official nature, but they were revealing and plainly incriminating. As the news reached the governor, she quietly was grateful. She did not specifically know what had happened. She didn’t need to know but was glad that once in a while a measure of random justice could be appreciated. Her attention was focused of course on the professor, the IRS agent, and her own network administrator.



Defeating their campaign to perpetrate an evil and destructive plot against the people of New Mexico had become her highest priority. Her small team of confidants was becoming even more important to her. She made inquiry directly with Trooper Duvall, but he was careful and circumspect in his description of the scene and the investigation. She smelled it immediately; this was Cohen.

101

Julianna shared with Sally her encounter with the businessman and her cousin, Maria, now known to her as Heather Marcos. Sally was not in the circle of those investigating the *Demônios* attacks, but she was certainly familiar with it through news events. She was interested to hear the name Heather Marcos from Julianna’s lips and she certainly knew the state network administrator.

She asked Julianna, “Do you suppose I could meet her sometime?”

At first Julianna said, “Sure, I would love for you to meet her,” but then an alarm went off in her spirit and she thought that maybe Heather is dangerous and she would not want to put Sally in jeopardy. She backed it off and said, “Heather is very busy but I can ask her if she would have time to meet you. I’ve told her what a help you have been to me.” Sally did not press the matter further.

* * * * *

The next Monday morning, the governor summoned Bob Cohen, Mindy McConnell, Jim Pappas, and Avon Duvall to confer with her in the underground conference room. She asked them to stagger their arrival times. The State Trooper informed his watch officer that he had an important meeting at the capitol and that was all that was needed. He served at the governor’s good pleasure, he said, which wasn’t technically correct but the watch officer rolled his eyes and said, “Oh please.”

When they all sat down at the conference table, the governor motioned Carlos to post himself at the door, with Bill along the corridor and near the elevator. Within the fortress, one could hardly feel more secure but she felt that she could not be too careful. There was fresh orange juice, coffee, and iced water on the table and each helped themselves.

“Thank you all for meeting today,” she said. “So where do we stand?” She needed no preamble.

“Ma’am,” Duvall began, “The explosion and deaths of two confirmed *Demônios* operatives has been investigated. The explosion was dramatic, with complete annihilation of the two bodies, but their DNA matched the samples we found in the vehicle that was left at the site. Other documentary evidence in the vehicle tells us the same thing—narcotics are slipping into the Santa Fe district at an alarming rate. These two were apparently trying to dig up a cache of drugs, but there were none. Somehow the explosion seems to have been a Claymore mine, or something similar. It looks to me like an inter-gang trap.”

The governor glanced at Cohen, who gave no reaction at all. She said, “Any comment, Mr. Cohen? You are certainly familiar with such a device from your Navy experience, yes?”

“No ma’am, nothing to add on that. But I do not think Claymores, if that is what was involved, are all that unusual for an organization as well-funded as the *Elevados” was* all Cohen could offer. She stared hard at him and then nodded.

As if on cue Pappas changed the subject. “Madam Governor, we have been able to get some feed from the taps on Mr. Xappa in Ogden. He is quite the frequent communicator to both our professor friend and to his other friend nearby,” he stated. “The messages were all very brief, almost coded it seems.”

“Okay Jim, thank you,” she said.

In good reporter fashion, McConnell had learned through her own network that Heather’s cousin, Julianna, had been confronted by a *Demônios* trafficker but was assisted by Heather Marcos in whose company she was with. McConnell had met Julianna at the coffee shop by accident when she, McConnell, was meeting with two of the pastors’ wives for security team updating. Julianna had talked about the encounter, spoke with affection of her cousin’s intervention, and bragged about her important relative, unwittingly contributing intelligence data to McConnell.

Mindy spoke, “It was a minor altercation but Julianna seemed to think she was being let go from the business she was in. She was very happy about that. She also



said one thing about Ms. Marcos that I thought was interesting. She said that the woman was fiercer than she had ever known her to be. Maybe nothing but I thought I would share the detail.”

“Fiercer?” the governor mused. “I guess there are times when that is a compliment and other times a dangerous thing.”

“She is an important part of this web. And I would like to think that she can be turned,” Cohen remarked. Governor Grimley’s eyebrow went up at that idea.

“Turned, Bob?” she asked.

“You know the term, Madam Governor, when an agent is given some compelling reason to switch sides, he or she is ‘turned.’ We are dealing with a large and powerful, multinational organization. They are not energized by ideology as might be the case with a political entity or even a whole country. *Elevados* is driven by profit and payback, that’s about it. We cannot underestimate their reach or their resources.”

“Are you thinking it could happen?” she asked.

“I do not know, of course, but if she could be turned, she could become a major asset, is all I am saying,” he replied. “I was a combatant, not a spy, but I was familiar with enough operations where people were turned, at least for a time.”

The governor was silent, thinking.

“Ma’am,” Duvall offered. “Would you like a couple of us to approach Miss Namara, carefully, and see if there might be an . . .,” he struggled for the word.

“Introduction?” the governor suggested. “Might be worth a try. If Ms. Marcos is spooked then so be it. I think she suspects something now anyway, just a vibe I get when I’m with her.”

“How about this.” asked Mindy. “Jim and I, we get a meet through the social worker Sally, whom we have both met through the Hit-G security group. We wouldn’t want

to tell Miss Sally too much, but perhaps enough to gain an introduction to Ms. Namara. Then, we tell her the story."

"How do you know the young lady would not tip off her cousin?" Cohen asked, a fair enough concern.

"We don't, and that is the beauty of it. Kind of a vaccination approach. You know, inject enough infection to trigger the antibodies," Mindy said.

"Whoa, folks, you're going over my head," the governor objected, poured herself a second cup of coffee, and took the large carafe around to the others and refilled their cups.

Mindy kept on, "I'm playing out this idea. If Ms. Namara can be given enough of the true story about her cousin, in a non-threatening way, with some assurance of at least plausible immunity, she might appreciate the gravity of the situation. Seems she is no fan of the *Demônios*, and if we speak to her about this in a way that the gang is our target, not her cousin, she might be a link to initiate a conversation with Ms. Marcos?"

Pappas was the one who thought it was a dumb idea. "I don't think there's a bat's chance in the ocean that Heather can be turned. She is a total soldier. She has shown us that."

Cohen laughed. "A bat's chance where?" They all laughed, which they needed, but the laughter died quickly.

"Our route to the professor and all that he is doing, and to the IRS fellow, is going to be through Ms. Marcos, I think," said the governor. "I do not expect a large collaboration with the feds or the military. Things are so politically volatile on a national level right now that even with the disappearance of churches and even with multiple homicides, the government is not going to give us much help. My point is, we've got to get to the bottom of this ourselves."

"I like a smaller operation myself," Cohen added.



The governor took the ball. "What do we have to lose to let Ms. McConnell and Mr. Pappas . . .," she looked at Pappas who didn't seem too eager, ". . . let them approach Ms. Namara through this social worker and see where it goes?"

McConnell, Duvall, and Cohen all seemed game. Pappas shook his head.

"I am afraid of us blowing our chance at taking down the professor and Mr. Xappa by a premature signal through this young former prostitute. I do not mind being involved; I just don't see much chance of getting to Ms. Marcos through her cousin."

They were at an impasse.

"Let's sit on it for a day or two, and then get together again. Can you all meet sometime on Wednesday?" the governor asked. They all could, and so their next meeting was set, same location, same protocols.

* * * * *

Sometimes things seem to randomly happen. Other times a certain providence can be discerned with chance encounters, or at least suspected. Events occur that look accidental, or people meet unintentionally, but have a meaningful encounter. Fortuitous things happen simultaneously and only later can some design be seen.

* * * * *

Father Frank Portacomaro walked into the coffee shop called Iconik Coffee Roasters on Galisteo Street, ordered a nice on-site roasted dark coffee, light and sweet, purchased a scone and sat by the fire in the lounge area. It was late afternoon and the place was quiet. As a well-known clergyman, he looked forward to occasional moments of anonymity.

A few minutes passed though, and in walked Heather Marcos, to whom the priest had never been officially introduced, but who he knew. She ordered a coffee and sat across from him near the fire. Portacomaro recognized her, and wondered if it would be rude to introduce himself. He was wearing his collar and worried that she might be put off by being spoken to by a priest.

“Excuse me, are you Ms. Marcos from the capitol?” he asked, with genuine friendliness.

“Yes,” was all she said and was immediately on guard.

“You don’t know me, ma’am, I am Father Frank. I am sorry for the abrupt introduction but I thought I recognized you from there. I have business there occasionally. May I join you?” he asked.

“Sure, that’s fine, Father, but I must warn you I am not a practicing Catholic,” she said.

“I understand,” he said, and smiled. “Sometimes I don’t feel like one either.”

Heather thought, *I like this guy.*

Frank sat down closer to her and sipped his coffee. He offered, “I’m the pastor of the Santa Maria Chapel, and well, things have been quite bizarre lately. I guess I’m getting a breather today.”

“Didn’t your church lose its roof or something?” she asked. “A fire or something?”

“Yes, we did. Very strange. Poof. Gone. It’s a hard thing to have happen, you know? I love our old chapel—1875 you know,” he was authentically sad, and Heather could see that.

“I am sorry, Father. That is tragic. But you can rebuild, *si*?” she suggested.

“Yes, we will, in time. For now, we do the best we can. It is not like those other churches that lost their entire buildings. But still, it is a strange thing to happen, like the fire in Notre-Dame de Paris. Well, not that dramatic,” a laughed.

“Still a hard loss, Father, I know. And I am sure you do good work for the people of our community,” she offered.

“I do try, Ms. Marcos and you are kind for saying so. Thank you. I wish I could figure out what happened to our roof. It was so very odd, to have just that part disappear.



Perhaps we should get used to injustices happening. I suppose they are nothing new,” he said, and he was sincere. He had heard who this woman was, but he knew none of the talk among the governor’s inner circle these days.

Heather thought then said, not quite believing that she might be placing herself at risk, “Father, I could do a little digging. I have resources. If I find anything out, research that is being done, I will let you know. Now, I must go. Thank you for a nice visit. You have a disarming way about you, *padre.*” She smiled and walked out of Iconik.

The priest knew this was not a meaningless, random encounter. He knew that Ms. Marcos was a person of interest, at least on some level. He would ponder this and enjoy his coffee. In fact, he warmed it up with a refill.

* * * * *

Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia, a.k.a. Heather Marcos, was not accustomed to struggling with trouble in her conscience. She had seen too much, done too much, and herself been victimized too much. She had grown a fierceness with which she certainly was not raised back in Mexico. Since her reunion with Julianna and seeing what was going on in her cousin’s life, she found her own spirit softening. It puzzled her; it seemed like the hard edge which had become so typical in her attitude had become dulled by something outside herself.

She had heard about the chapel’s disappearing roof and she was quite sure that she knew the source of this assault on a place of worship here in Santa Fe. She did not have any idea how the event had failed to completely dissolve that church. Subconsciously, she felt glad that it had not done so.

As she walked the twelve blocks from Iconik back to the state capitol she felt her mind clearing. *Maybe I can help them, and at the same time create a cover for myself* she pondered as she walked briskly. When she made it back to her office, she noticed Governor Grimley in the hallway.

“Madam Governor, may I speak with you for a moment?” she asked.

“Sure, Heather,” Grimley replied and sat down in the network administrator’s office.

“Ma’am, I heard about another church disappearance. You heard about it, I assume?” she asked.

The governor felt the back of her neck light up and immediately went on guard. “Yes of course, the mystery continues,” and she tried to give a small laugh.

“Ma’am, I read online about a technology created in China which can actually beam material away from its place where it was” she said, awkwardly. “I do not know if that is exactly what has happened here, but if you like I can look into it some more.” She put on a look of sincerity and concern.

*Oh, she is good,* the governor thought and decided to play along.

“Anything that can help us get to the bottom of this would be great, Heather,” she said with some enthusiasm, not to be outdone in the duplicity department.

“Madam Governor, I will get back to you,” Heather replied.

* * * * *

People sometimes have an uncanny sixth sense where they can interact in a completely fraudulent way, smiling, being as furtive as they can, and yet both know that the other is lying. There need to be no slip ups, change in body language or obvious giveaways. They both *know* that the other is trying to pull something over. The governor and the network administrator had now gotten to this point. Governor Grimley knew she needed to act fast before Ms. Marcos slipped away and escaped.

And although she thought she had masterfully carried off her charade, Heather knew the time had come to get out of Santa Fe, and perhaps get across the border into Mexico where she knew that *Demônios* leadership would protect her. Maybe her value would lead to another placement as a mole of some kind again. She decided to make a call to Mr. Xappa in Ogden and see if he could assist her. For all his sleezy characteristics, the man had an extraordinary skill set in espionage-related exfil operations.



She called him on a new cell phone, at night, and their words were few. He indicated that if she could travel to Ogden on business, he would provide her with the latest revenue data and mobility documentation that the State of New Mexico had requested. She said she thought she could arrange that. Xappa would arrange for her to fly from Salt Lake City to Mexico City as soon as possible. He would provide a new passport, Utah driver’s license and a full dossier. He could have crafted a new photo for identification cards and all Heather would need to do would be to cut her hair and apply a fake tattoo to her forearm. She indicated that she would comply.

* * * * *

Jim Pappas’ wiretap on Mr. Xappa was still active and sending the carefully encrypted record of his communications, including this latest conversation with Ms. Marcos. He made two calls. First, he called Trooper Duvall and then the governor’s office requesting that she meet him that day at the outside cafe. She was available and agreed. Duvall was off that day and said he would make himself available and rendezvous with the governor’s two security aides.

Pappas met the governor outside and they stood over cups of coffee and acted out a laughing and warm conversation. Very quietly, he brought Grimley up to date and she nodded and then laughed again. Duvall appeared but stayed out of immediate sight, standing with Carlos while Bill remained at the main doors.

Pappas said, “Lucy, she is going to leave. Her Ogden contact is arranging an exfiltration for her out of the country, to Mexico.”

“You are certain, Jim?” the governor pressed.

“Unless Mr. Xappa knows we’re on to them and is creating a complete fake operation, then yes, I am certain. I think she is planning to leave tonight.”

“Thank you, Jim. I will take it from here,” Grimley said and laughed out loud again. She casually walked over to Duvall and Carlos and said, “Pick up Ms. Marcos now, gentlemen. Immediately. She is about to depart Santa Fe for good.” The two men nodded and the governor went back into the capitol.

The pantomime had been a wise move because Pappas and Grimley had been under surveillance. A Hispanic man in a hoodie across the plaza was reading a newspaper and using a parabolic mic to try to hear the brief conversation. He could pick up the laughing and a few odd words but could not discern the quieter conversation. He knew the governor was up to something. He did not notice the conversation with the state trooper or the aides though.

He text messaged her back and said: ***Todo claro,*** all clear. Heather breathed a sigh of relief and went back to picking though her desk for a few essential items to take with her. She did not see or hear State Trooper Avon Duvall and Security Agent Carlos approach her from behind, ask her to stand and place her hands behind her back.

Not often caught off guard, Heather stiffened, saw the Glock in Duvall's grasp, and went limp. She stood, shot a devilish glare at the men, and turned around to be zip-tied. They transported her to the state police barracks where she was processed and placed in a holding cell. Her phone, of course, was confiscated and placed in a plastic bag along with other items from her handbag, which included a small Ruger handgun. Heather Marcos was read her rights and the process was initiated of assigning her a public defender. Although not present for the arrest, Governor Lucy Grimley was fully aware of what had transpired and felt a sense of satisfaction that at least one *Demônios* operative had now been apprehended. She was eager to learn the results of an interrogation. Out of nowhere the thought occurred to her *maybe this drop in the bucket will lower my state's crime rate.* New Mexico had one of the highest rates of kidnapping, murder, rape, and gun violence in the nation. She, its governor, had had enough.

102

In Ogden, Utah, on 25th Street, three FBI agents approached the office of Supervisory Revenue Officer Francis Xappa, Esq. on the fifth floor. He had viewed their arrival in the parking lot from his office window. He knew something was up, so he slipped down the hall quickly to a service stairwell and tried to make an escape. A secretary had noticed his hasty departure and as the agents arrived on their floor she motioned to the hallway and told them about the service stairwell.



The agents were accompanied by two others, one at the front entrance on 25th Street and one posted at the rear of the facility. Five agents had been dispatched for this apprehension and it was the last one who spied Mr. Xappa coming out of the rear door of the facility. The agents were all in communication with each other and the fifth agent called out, "Francis Xappa, you're under arrest."

Xappa pulled a handgun and fired off three shots at the agent, who was expecting resistance, and crouched behind a parked vehicle. At that moment, the three other agents exited the rear of the facility, saw that a gun battle was beginning and all three fired at Xappa, who was struck by two rounds—one in the upper thigh and one in the chest. He went down and immediately the confrontation was concluded. The federal agents called for an ambulance and also called the Utah State Police and the Ogden Police Department to report the incident and requested assistance.

A single observer had been watching. He was a Columbian national, part of the *Demônios* organization and assigned overwatch of Mr. Xappa. He was watching from across Grant Avenue, through binoculars. As the action concluded with Xappa on the ground, he walked slowly to his SUV, got in, texted a message through his cell phone and slowly drove off. No one noticed him.

* * * * *

Utah State Trooper Jessica Young texted Jim Pappas that the Ogden operation was complete, suspect neutralized, and Pappas texted the news to Governor Grimley, Bob Cohen, and Avon Duvall. It was not immediately known if Xappa would survive and Duvall huffed to himself, "I never know what 'suspect neutralized' really means."

In Santa Fe, the governor, the trooper, and the journalist were meeting in Grimley's office. They were digesting the arrest of Ms. Marcos when news of the Ogden event came through.

"Gentlemen, we seem to have scored some serious points this day," Grimley spoke with an air of relief.

"We do indeed, Madam Governor," Duvall agreed.

Cohen was not so sanguine. “The capture of a bishop and a knight does not a chess victory make,” he said.

Duvall frowned. “Throw water on our parade, why don’t ya, Bob,” he snorted.

But Cohen was not celebrating yet. He added, “Two of the operatives down is good, but there are many other, including kingpin.”

“Bob, you are right. But this is progress,” Grimley said. “We will not roll out the marching bands quite yet, and if our Ogden friend does not live, we haven’t gained much there. While I have been known to request federal assistance before, it takes away whatever interrogation might be had with the Ogden agent out of our hands. I do not think the FBI will be handing him over to us.”

Cohen thought and added, with some positivity, “Maybe it slows up the attack on the Hit-G churches from the IRS. Mr. Xappa’s letters seem to indicate that he was the force behind the move to injure them.”

“Yes indeed,” the governor added, “My investigation into that, as far as I could go, identified no other IRS offices in play.”

Duvall then took the conversation elsewhere. “So where do we go with Ms. Marcos?”

The governor answered. “I think that with assistance from a couple of others, the three of us should head over there and talk to her now.”

* * * * *

In the interrogation room at the state police barracks, Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia, alias Heather Marcos, sat by herself, her head down. She was exhausted emotionally despite her strong disposition. She didn’t even really understand why she was so drained, but she was.

The door opened and in walked the governor, Trooper Avon Duval, and online journalist, Bob Cohen, whom she loathed. The three seated themselves across from her and two detectives viewed the interview through the one-way mirror.



Appropriately, the governor began the discussion.

“Heather, or should I say Maria, you are charged with a set of crimes. I am sorry this is happening. But we will not waste time on that.”

Heather glowered at her, and again, shot a vicious glance at Cohen who remained expressionless.

The governor went on. “Do you prefer Heather or Maria, for this interview?”

For an instant, the younger woman softened, but hardened again. “I am sure the governor will be pleased to use any name she likes,” she said, coldly.

“Very well, Heather,” the governor said, and carried on. “We are aware of your involvement with the *Demônios Elevados* and their commercial activities. We are also aware of your connection to other operatives from a more creative enterprise, specifically, the disappearance of several facilities here in Santa Fe plus the deaths of five citizens at one of them. To put it plainly, if you cooperate with us in our investigation, it will help your predicament. If you maintain a hard composure and stonewall us, it will not go well for you. The full weight of the process of jurisprudence and prosecution will be on you and you alone.”

Cohen was surprised at the governor’s directness and stern introduction. For her own part, the governor was angry. She was angry at this young woman who had so deceptively played her, and she was angry at herself for being taken in by Heather’s duplicity. They awaited the woman’s response.

* * * * *

During the entire whirlwind of events in Santa Fe, no one on the Hit-G side of things was ever really sure who was up to the plate, who was on deck, and who would need to come out of the bullpen at any given time. They were not working with a practiced order of events or game plan and were feeling their way from one crisis to the next, trying to focus on how to apply resources and intelligence as they became available. Each participant was learning that anything could or might happen at any given time. From the initial disappearance of twenty structures, to the several violent assaults, to the attacks in the state capitol area, and the

subsequent building disappearances, it was an unprecedented time. But if there was an upside to things, it was the community unity that seemed to have been spawned by the web of events. On a micro level, there was the beneath-the-radar friendships of a few people that no one would ever have predicted. On the macro level, there was the Cavern Fellowship, the support of the air force, and an ongoing federal attentiveness that was proving beneficial. There was also a quiet and inconspicuous unity around the administration of Governor Lucille Grimley. Political flashpoints had mostly disappeared and no one was missing them.

There was another good thing that was happening, also quiet and unpublicized. It was not publicized because certain leaders discerned that it was better not to have it media documented. This sense of not making it a news item came, strangely first, from CNN reporter Mindy McConnell. It was a thing that at this point, was not officially acknowledged by anyone and no one even knew its boundaries, dimensions, or depth. It was a spiritual warmth for a Christianity that was not institutional, denominational, or even very organized. It was an unexpected participant that first sensed that something was happening—Ms. McConnell. She had posted regular news items about the more dramatic happenings in the Hit-G drama, but she had avoided any qualitative editorializing about the spiritual growth that was occurring as a result thereof in the Santa Fe area.

On the dark side of the conflict though there was certainly no sense of warmth. Professor Hernández in São Paulo, Brazil, was dismayed at his recent loss of contact with Mr. Xappa and Ms. Marcos. He received notice from Ogden that Xappa had been shot and apprehended, and that Ms. Marcos had been arrested in Santa Fe. None of the *Demônios* assets had been able to intervene. The overall commercial flow would still proceed, but the professor's rage went way beyond the financial inflow to the gang. His anger became even more focused on the only leverage he had, which was no small thing to be sure, the deployment of the SPT-BAM. He wanted to make the administration of the Governor of New Mexico pay for her impudence. But he also issued another directive, heartless, full of evil: a black order for the elimination of both Xappa and Marcos. It was with some regret that he would lose his friend, Francis, and with less regret that someone with Marcos' skills would be lost to the ongoing goals of the *Demônios* organization. But it was necessary to maintain the integrity of the organization's overall strategies and wider personnel rosters. There could be no compromise.



*Screegion was aware of the collaboration between the Demônios members but did not have anything so human-like as a preference for one person or the other to choose as a target. The demon was driven by the searing mandate of the Archas that nothing less than Santa Fe itself be destroyed. Even Screegion was terrorized by the power of that evil battle plan. There was no fine-tuning or finessing it, but the fear of not completing the assignment.*

* * * * *

The governor exited the interrogation room, and that left Duvall and Cohen sitting with Heather Marcos. The trooper and the ex-SEAL were in no hurry. One of the other agents entered and placed a pitcher of water on the table with some paper cups.

"Are you gentlemen going to waterboard me now?" Heather sniffed.

"Hey! Why didn't I think of that?" Cohen smirked.

"Shut up, Bob" said Duvall and poured himself a cup of water. "You are welcome to some water, Ms. Marcos. There is no sinister design here, just some humanity."

"Fine," she said, accepting the offer. She was quite parched and took a second cup.

"Ms. Marcos," Cohen said, "I am sure you are aware of how much trouble you are in. The governor was not blowing smoke when she said this is a chance for you to help yourself. But if you are so committed and loyal to the gang and their goals, no matter what it costs you or anyone else, then okay. We can waste the day sitting with you while you brood over the end of your life. I am not here as an officer of the state or anything other than a newsman. But you people have targeted me, and so it is personal. I make no dramatic projections, but it appears you are finished. It would not surprise me if even now the *Demônios* higher-ups are not already ordering your elimination."

"Isn't it funny, Avon," Cohen looked at the trooper, "how we use euphemisms like elimination to mean killing someone?"

This was a crime-world reality that Marcos was familiar with, and it had not caught up to her yet. She knew that the *Demônios* organization possessed all kinds of elimination stratagems, and that sooner or later they would find her.

She racked her head back and looked at the ceiling. She stroked her hair and said, dispassionately, “Well, what if I wanted to deal? What are you offering me?”

“I will be back,” said Duvall. He tapped on the door and exited.

Heather sat and glared at Cohen, now just the two of them at the table. Cohen made no expression and said nothing.

“May the record show, Mr. Cohen, that I detest you. I hate you.” She looked around the room for cameras or recording devices. She could see none but she was sure that her words were being recorded. “I have conspired in no specific plan for your harm. I would not be sad if you were harmed but I have not participated in any event aimed at you.” Cohen thought this clever but was not surprised at her somewhat sophisticated ruse. He was not moved.

Duvall came back into the room with a detective, Sylvia Morrisette. She sat down at the table and said, “Ms. Marcos, we will provide protective custody for you while you are incarcerated. If you are able to make bail, you will have witness protection while you are on supervised release. We will recommend a reduction of the charges on the state level but we have no control over any federal charges. As for us, we will extend leniency commensurate with the degree of assistance and information that you might provide. Your prosecution is of secondary significance to us. You are a small fish who has committed felonious crimes, exacerbated by abusing your position of trust, violation of a high-level security clearance, and your potential complicity in the loss of life. However, we are more interested in preventing further injury and harm to the citizens of New Mexico by that with which you have been involved. Do you understand my position?”

This was a strange way for a police detective to talk, but Heather did indeed grasp what was being offered to her.

“Furthermore, we are prepared to offer you something additional to help your situation. Your cousin, Ms. Julianna Namara, is known to have changed professions



recently but has been met with some resistance by your organization,” Morrisette continued.

Heather got up from her chair and yelled across the table, “You leave my cousin out of this!”

The detective was unfazed and said, quietly, “She is already in it, as I think you can imagine. The *Demônios* will not leave her alone. We can assist her though in a meaningful way,” and she looked at Duvall, who nodded. “We don’t do this out of the goodness of our hearts, Ms. Marcos. We want your full cooperation and we know Ms. Namara’s welfare is something you care about, maybe more than profiting from the drug market.”

At this, Heather Marcos finally broke down. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She slumped again in the chair. She wept bitterly and the detective, the trooper, and the journalist let her cry. They were in no hurry. As Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia emerged, the shower of tears turned into a tsunami. A storm of grief hit the woman that surprised even her. After a few moments she regained her composure.

“I wish no harm at all to come to Julianna. I would gladly give my life for her. How can you help her?” she asked.

Duvall said, “If you can reverse your agency, and work for us, it will go a long way towards the benefit of your cousin. I will not make it sound better than it is. It may indeed cost you your life, when you get in the way of the *Demônios* tactics. I think you know this perhaps better than we do.”

“Yes,” Marcos said. “It may indeed. My cousin has deserved none of what has become her life, and I would do anything to change that for her. I cannot change her past, but if I can alter her future trajectory, I will.”

“I think I can assure you that we will do everything that we can to protect and help this young woman discover a happy and prosperous trajectory, as you say,” Duvall affirmed. “I think I speak for the sympathies of anyone who has met her. And if that seems a fair arrangement to you, how can you help us?” he directly asked.

Detective Morrisette went on. “Ms. Namara will not need witness protection per se. You will though, and as I am sure you are aware, it is never a guaranteed safety. The bad guys can be quite resourceful and vigilant in their efforts, but I think we can be more creative, perhaps, with Ms. Namara’s future. We would try, at least.”

Cohen sat motionless, quiet, taking all this in. He knew that Heather Marcos was a key player and wished to do nothing to sour the delicate deal that was being made. Finally, he entered the conversation once again.

“Heather, I understand that you hate me. I do not blame you for this. But I will sign on to this plan, to assist in Ms. Namara’s future in any way that I can. I think you can agree that the skill set I possess is something which has been proven to your associates. Our goals are clear. We wish to end the criminal enterprise in Santa Fe in any way that we can. Let me be clear. I am not a law enforcement officer and so I am not bound by their code or rules of engagement. That makes me, from one perspective, valuable to you in this. Understand, I offer no services, but my benevolence could be of service.”

Heather glared at him. Rarely had she felt such a loathing for anyone, but she was also smart, and she got his drift. Her wisdom had grown to the point of appreciating any future advantage she might gain beyond the emotional heat of any given moment. She nodded.

“I understand, Mr. Cohen,” Heather said, “I can appreciate what you are saying. Thank you.” It was with a great effort that she spat out a courteous answer. Cohen was not fooled of course, but a good crossroads had been traversed.

The detective brought the interview to a close. Morrisette said, “Alright Ms. Marcos, you will be processed and housed in our custody until the normal legal process has its course. Your public defender is on the way and you of course will meet with counsel as soon as possible.” Marcos nodded and said she understood. She had little confidence in an appointed attorney’s advocacy at this point. She was primarily interested in her cousin’s welfare. Her own jig was up.

103



As a full reconnaissance report came into Professor Hernández in São Paulo, his own fury intensified. He paced around his office suite. He strode through the whole building muttering to himself. This was not acceptable. This was outrageous. This incursion into his own sovereignty was not going to go without retribution.

He went back to his office, closed the door, and activated his iPad. The Amazônia-1 and its SPT-BEAM technology were waiting and in a good orbit to accommodate his plan for retaliation for the apprehension of Xappa and Marcos. Their capture, he said to himself, would cost the religio-Jew-loving mongrels in Santa Fe dearly. Then he calmed down and sketched out his tactical plan. It was a vile and putrid concoction of his own depravity laced with delectable evil notions implanted by Screegion. They must be *eliminados*.

* * * * *

A Columbian team of three in Santa Fe was contacted and given instructions to learn, surveil, and exploit the whereabouts of both Mr. Xappa and Ms. Marcos. At the most advantageous time, they were to be eliminated, without delay or ambiguity, as directed by the professor. These men were designated by the professor as, Uno, Dos, and Tres. Uno would be the finder, Dos the equipment technician, and Tres the unit commander and triggerman. Tres was provided with a large amount of US currency plus a case of fentanyl vials in baby-wipes packaging, to use as they saw fit. Their coded designations were Uni, Duey, and Trey.

* * * * *

This directive was picked up by Cadet Andre Ferreira, who had decided on his own to make a careful attempt to hack into the professor’s communications. He succeeded in doing so with a blend of his own prowess and the professor’s arrogance. Ferreira immediately communicated the hit order to Capitão Breno Lucas, who immediately sent the comms flag to Bruce Philipsburg in Albuquerque. Philipsburg alerted the governor, through Bob Cohen, since he thought Cohen would trigger a faster response. That assumption was wise.

Simultaneously, two operations were underway: the action initiated against Francis Xappa and Heather Marcos, and the reaction to it from the unofficial team of Governor Lucille Grimley.

All the while Bob Cohen maintained his daily news journaling on Santa Fe Day, which had become more of a cover operation for the covert activities he was undertaking with his team.

The FBI was monitoring Xappa's hospitalization. It appeared he would recover from the two gunshot wounds. His chest wound turned out to be less problematic than the wound to his thigh. Miraculously, neither round severed any arteries, but his leg wound made it difficult for him to walk. In the hospital he proved to be cantankerous and wore on the patience of the nursing staff and the two agents who were guarding him. He would soon be transferred to New Mexico for processing along with Heather Marcos.

* * * * *

Trey was anxious to get the job done but Uni had not yet learned that Mr. Xappa would be transferred to Santa Fe, although it was to be expected. Trey mumbled to himself, "Bring him to me. I will take him off your hands."

Uni looked at him sideways. "You are talking to yourself now?"

"No, I am speaking to the *idiota* American justice system that takes forever to process someone they have already decided is guilty," Trey said.

At that point Duey came into the hotel room. He had two large duffle bags, looking like travel cases and a rolling suitcase. He wore a snappy business suit and he was clean shaven. He looked every bit the travelling executive, which in a sense of course, he was.

"That is the equipment you asked for, Trey," and he sat down in one of the room's chairs.

"Good, very good. There is no word yet on the relocation. We expect it at any time though," said Trey.

Uni, Duey, and Trey were quartered in a nice hotel, across from the state police barracks. Their belief was that upon arrival from Ogden of Mr. Xappa, they would



set up the kill zone for the two ill-fated operatives. They felt no sadness or regret. They were doing that for which they had already been paid adequately.

"My contact in Ogden says that our friend from there is on his way," Uni reported to the other two, after seeing a text message on his phone. The *Demônios* had a wide network of lower-level people, some of which had only the job of reporting movements of people of interest to the gang.

Trey opened the first duffle bag and removed a disassembled sniper rifle. As previously used in the capitol attack, this was a Cheyenne Tactical M-200 Intervention sniper rifle with a box of .408 CheyTac rounds. Duey liked to say, "This business accoutrement leaves little room for negotiation."

"*Si*, my friend, and we are expected to close the deal with haste," Trey replied.

* * * * *

Insurgence, counter-insurgence, communications, watchfulness, and detection of various signs were all disciplines that were engrained into the thinking of a US Navy SEAL. Bob Cohen had learned the value of each, built them into his mindset and they did not leave him even though he had been out of the Navy for several years.

He and Detective Morrisette again sat across the table from Heather Marcos. She stared blankly ahead. A deal had been struck and she was, if nothing, a committed person to whatever deals she made. This one, which would involve her complete betrayal of the *Demônios Elevados* and which she knew quite likely would cost her life, seemed a worthy transaction if it resulted in a major life-change for her cousin. If she could sacrifice herself so that Julianna was transported to a different life, she would be fine with it.

"Maria, or do you still wish to be called Heather?" Morrisette asked.

The accused smiled. "Thank you for asking, Detective. You know, I would love to spend the end of my life being called the name *mi madre* gave me, Maria."

Cohen then said, "Your partner from Ogden is on his way here. He was injured in his apprehension but will survive."

Maria snuffed, “He is a slimy bastard, as are you, sir. I feel no sorrow for whatever pains he is feeling. He was my business partner. Nothing more.”

“As you wish, Maria. When he arrives, we are expecting surveillance by your organization,” Morrisette said.

“Of course,” Maria said, dispassionately. “They will attempt a double elimination. I cannot say how or when, because I do not know, but it will come. That is the *Elevados* way. The circle of loyalty and mercies is very small. We all live with a reality of being ultimately expendable.”

“And what of your friend in São Paulo?” Cohen pressed. “Is he expendable too?”

At this Maria sat back, taken by surprise. She had not known at all that his existence was known by these people. She tried to act nonplussed but it was pointless. She thought to herself quickly, *if they know about the professor, then they know much more, I am sure.* She carefully calculated her response.

“Who are you talking about?” she asked in a way that fooled no one.

At this point, another person came into the room who had been listening to the conversation from outside. It was Captain Bruce Philipsburg, in full United States Air Force uniform. Maria did not know this man.

Philipsburg sat at the table across from Maria. He stared at her coolly, and she returned his stare.

“Ms. Marcos, or Maria,” he began, “You are a very bright person, I am told, having served this government with state-of-the-art networking services. I am told you are adept at hardware issues as well as software.”

She was confused, but said, “Yes sir.”

“Maria, we are aware that a certain physics luminary in São Paulo has contrived some cutting-edge technology. This science can transport matter from one place to another. Do you follow?” he asked.



The woman gave no look of recognition, not wanting to provide any admission of complicity in the Hit-G saga. She had observed first-hand the disappearance of the safehouse—an experience which shook her when she remembered it. She also knew that deaths had occurred and she could potentially be drawn into further criminal indictment, possibly murder charges.

“It seems that this technology, is known as a force-beam effect or plasmatized restructuring. It was developed by a physics professor. In other words, ma’am, we are on to him and the degree of mischief which he can cause even yet is impressive and significant. We wish to shut him down, as you may suspect.” At that the captain halted. It was enough for her to know that the governor’s team was now federally supported and that the US military was paying attention.

At this point, something inside of her snapped. She was a person of great emotional reserve and toughness, but now it was over. She realized that from this point forward her own moves were going to be motivated by her sense of self-preservation plus a desire to help her cousin.

“Alright,” she said softly. “I understand my situation. Let me say that the alleged scholar of whom you speak is particularly annoyed at American church people, or so I hear.” She wanted to maintain as much theoretical distance from the professor as she could.

“As we speak, I am sure there is a hit squad waiting to end my life, as well as that of the man in Ogden. If the two of us are neutralized, your inside track to get to the other person is greatly lessened. My point is, I need to be kept alive.”

She fell back in her chair and sighed. “None of this is what I wanted when I first came to this country,” she said quietly.

“What can you share, Maria, that might help us, while maintaining the ruse that you *didn’t* help us, if you need that shield,” asked the detective.

“I have never been to Brazil, but I have met the person in question a few times. He is very bright. I found him condescending and overtaken with a great hatred for religion and for its followers.” Maria continued.

"There is more going on, which I do not myself understand," she added.

"What would that be?" asked Cohen.

She glared at him again. She had grown to despise this man. She frowned, then said, "There is an evil afoot. I do not know what it is. But a blackness comes among us in the organization. More often recently when we have communicated. I saw it between Julio and Sergio." She almost looked afraid. "They would get this dark look on their faces. It was different than the professor. When referring to something he was planning—a 'beaming,' as he would call it—he became almost gleeful. Julio and Sergio were different, but there was something else there, I do not know what."

Philipsburg spoke up at this point. "Yes, I think I know what you mean. Evil. I felt it on Christmas Eve. A sad time to have to deal with evil, I might add."

Maria sniffled, "I don't know about Christmas Eve. Evil seems evil all the time. I am sorry to have been taken in by it."

Cohen did not buy that last comment, nor did the detective. Philipsburg ignored it.

"That aside, Maria, can you give us any information on the professor's future aspirations?" he asked.

Maria thought. She wanted to speak in a way that would serve her own interests, but she also wanted the nightmare to end. She looked at the faces of each of her three interrogators and settled on the captain.

"Captain," she said, "He is planning a series of attacks on these same congregations. He intends more than just the disappearance of buildings. He intends to liquidate as many of the people as he can. In a single day." She looked at the floor. "The last time I met him he said this. I do not know the technological specifics but he seemed quite confident that he could do it."

Morrisette asked, "Do you think he knows that you and Mr. Ogden have been taken into custody, and how that might affect his plans?"



Maria looked at the ceiling. "He knows. He thinks he is Santa Claus— 'he knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake,'" and she huffed.

Philipsburg asked, "What was his schedule, Maria?"

"I do not know for sure. It will be soon. Especially with my being . . ." Maria thought about the word, ". . . turned," she said, and for the first time smiled.

At this point, the air force captain took charge. "Here is what we want to do, Ms. Marcos, Maria. We want to stage an escape for you. You will break out of here." He looked at the detective, who gave no expression. "We will map a clever route for you to take to a fake safehouse where you will set yourself up to look different, get false identification papers, a passport, and some money. You will take a flight to São Paulo and contact the professor as soon as we can confirm that he is still there. You will gain access to his operation, as a collaborator, and sabotage his plan. Then . . ." and the captain spoke very quietly, ". . . we wish you to neutralize him." He paused for a moment, to gauge her reaction. There was none.

The captain continued, "There will be one agent there to give you overwatch. If you accomplish all this, you will have achieved indemnity. You can make your way from there to wherever you wish to go, except back here. If you wish to reestablish yourself with the *Demônios* gang, that is on you. This is a high stakes plan for us and for you. They still may kill you."

Maria looked straight ahead and then into the faces of each person there. "What does the governor say to this?" she asked.

At that point Governor Grimley came into the room. She did not sit. She stood at the door, and said, "To answer your question, Maria, I am on board with this. If you cooperate you will not be prosecuted or pursued further by us. You will be free to simply disappear," her sarcastic allusion to plasmatized restructuring.

"I am sorry our friendship ends like this," Grimley said flatly. "I hope to never see you again, and if I do, you should not expect any kindness. I wish this attack on my state quelled. I wish this perpetrator in Brazil neutralized. I also direct that any of

the professor's technology be commandeered and sent to our government for study. These are my objectives."

The captain added, "Ms. Marcos, Maria, I assume you know that the technology is substantive. It is possible that if the professor detects any collusion between you and us, he may seek to destroy the science. We would like to avoid that and recover anything we can. Do you understand?" Neither the captain nor the governor said it, but it was clear that Hit-G had reached the level of being a national defense concern. It had not as yet changed the national DEFCON status, but it had all the appropriate players paying attention.

"I own all the risk here," she said.

"You, and the citizens of New Mexico," the governor said with bitterness. "If your friend engages his plan, it sounds like many will die. Their risk against yours, Maria. We cannot guarantee anything after you leave our border. We will equip you well to accomplish this, and we will make every effort to protect your cousin."

Julianna Namara entered the discussion only now. It was the governor's trump card. Maria looked at the floor, again remembering her last visit with Julianna. A great wave of sadness again overtook her.

104

The Amazônia-1 satellite moved in orbit effortlessly. If one were to view it up close, it would look almost simplistic. Its solar induction array coupled with its advanced battery system kept it fully powered, waiting for a targeting command. The secret force beam laser also awaited a command. Large or small, made no difference; a single human being or a whole building, the satellite was prepared to complete whatever mission was sent to it by the professor's iPad. The device was inanimately impartial. Aim it. Fire it. And back to dormancy it went, needing little time to recharge.

* * * * *

Francis Xappa was being moved in Santa Fe to another hospital facility. The transfer was done openly and without security other than a single FBI agent. Xappa was bait



and he knew it. His condition had improved and it was projected that he would live. A facility step-down order had been issued and the legal authorities around him had decided to show him publicly, though unannounced. It was assumed that his present location was known by *Demônios* assets and being watched. He would not be blatantly dangled out in public but plenty of time was given lingering from hospital discharge to actual placement of the gurney in the ambulance. Xappa looked around warily and said to the agent, "You cannot do this to me."

The agent said, "Do what?"

*Demônios Elevados* had posted two snipers, well concealed and watching the two hospital ambulance bays. Each sniper was on duty for eight hours and then relieved by another. The organization did not lack in foresight, personnel, equipment, or sophistication of stealth. They were also well-trained in acquiring intelligence, almost rivaling the FBI. They knew that Xappa was imminent for transfer and they were waiting. His elimination was deemed a high priority. Xappa knew this too, and he entertained no delusions for his exfil, nor any plan by his partner Professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD. Stripped of his placement in Ogden he was of little use to the gang. His own bitter realization of this ground his soul, as he lay on the gurney under the overhang and next to the ambulance. As the EMTs took their time, the heat and his anxiety made him begin to sweat.

*Demons rarely indulged any thoughts of personal identity or aspiration except to boast between themselves of accomplishments or successes. This day, Screegion watched the hospital entrance, at least partly knowing what was transpiring. The demon, after all, was the author of the conspiracy to end this human's life and enjoy his doom. At least one today, it thought, and I trust that Archas will accept it.*

The snipers were in radio communication with each other and had not been sighted. The area around the capitol was now sniper-scoured with an elaborate camera/weapon sensing network. But the hospital areas were not generally considered a high risk setting for espionage. The two men were confident in the encryption that their radios carried. However, unbeknownst to them, they had been detected and were being listened to in an FBI van posted two blocks away.

"Our target is visible," the first sniper said to his partner. Xappa was in his crosshairs through his scope.

"Si," was the reply. The CheyTac M-200 used a QSM .408 titanium can for noise suppression, which worked competently enough.

Xappa lay on the gurney in the shade, waiting to be placed in the ambulance. In an instant, his body jerked, hit with one rifle round, and then a second. The FBI agent and an EMT took cover, the other heroically threw herself over Xappa. The agent radioed loudly that an attack was underway.

Xappa lay bleeding on the gurney, looking straight up.

The EMTs attempted to get him back into the hospital as a third round struck the pavement and ricocheted into the side of the building. It was not meant to hit anyone but serve as a distraction. The shooter then withdrew his weapon from the window, quickly disassembled and packed it into a modified Fender guitar case. He walked normally down the stairs of the Santa Fe Music Conservatory and exited to the street where he was picked up in a nondescript SUV by another *Demônios* soldier.

Xappa struggled to maintain consciousness. He was being worked on in the ER and weakened from his previous incident, was out of reserve. He breathed his last at 1:03 p.m. The EMTs were not aware of their patient's background and were sad that such a thing happened on their watch. They were also traumatized by the nature of the sniper attack. The agent spoke to them sympathetically but had hoped to catch a glimpse of where the shots had come from.

The sniper and his accomplice made a clean escape and within twenty minutes were eating lunch in a favorite restaurant.

*The passage of the unredeemed was never a celebrated event in any sense, just business in the demon world of commerce. Screegion snorked to itself, tallied the addition and moved on.*

* * * * *

Heather Marcos made her way to the airport, acting very nervous and watching her surroundings constantly. She intended to be picked up by *Demônios* surveillance in



some fashion and wanted it to look like she was making an escape—perhaps to avoid an assassination attempt. She wore a hoodie and processed her ticket and boarding pass. She would take an American flight to Dallas. After a layover she would then fly to Rio and then take a short hop to São Paulo. She would not relax until the full itinerary was completed. She had been given a clean cell phone.

The flying time gave her the opportunity to plan how she would first infiltrate the professor's confidence, and then his office. She knew that he did all his operations out of his office suite and he had bragged to her, in cloaked terms, that he was proud to have become so efficient. In all the trip would take close to twenty-four hours, and she might get some sleep on the nine-hour international flight. She had one handbag, two new passports, various IDs, and other personal documents. She carried a single suitcase, on wheels, which contained all that she owned in the world. In the DFW airport she was able to ATM herself two thousand dollars, which she exchanged for 10,604 Brazilian Real.

As to her feelings about the plan, she realized that she felt no loyalty at all to the professor or even to the gang. Somehow deep in her heart she knew it was all so evil. She had no sense of self-righteousness—she had conspired, colluded, and participated with the best of them and was respected for it.

Meanwhile, Professor Hernández had been made aware of her escape and said to himself, *smart menina, I will wait for her call*. He suspected nothing.

* * * * *

With the death of Francis Xappa and the deployment of Heather Marcos, things had quieted somewhat in Santa Fe. The governor was still very nervous as was Captain Philipsburg. Lucy Grimley felt a foreboding dread that the main act of this incredible drama was yet to commence. Even she was now referring to things as being related to Hit-G, as was the common vernacular.

Everyone on the team knew that elements of the *Demônios Elevados* were lurking around. No leads had been developed yet on the Xappa shooting. The lone gunman had made a clean disappearance with the aid of his partner. No evidence was found despite substantial investigation and searching of the various site possibilities. Even the conservatory had been walked through, but no evidence of a criminal presence was discovered.

The Cavern Fellowships were certainly nervous but praying a lot and trusting the Lord to give His providence to their future well-being. They rotated locations and kept their services relatively short. The two priests were very accommodating and standing by to help in any way they could. The roof on Santa Maria was being replaced. Father Frank Portacomaro was glad about that of course, but also felt a unique camaraderie with the Hit-G fellowships since his parish had now suffered loss too.

Father Clark felt his own gift of closeness to the situation, since the altercation with the three *Demônios* members who had assaulted him and Steve Menendez at the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship site, which now seemed so long ago. Clark and Menendez had become good friends and the theological divide between them seemed lessened in light of their shared enemies. It wasn't that Menendez was becoming more Catholic or that Clark was becoming more Protestant. There was no need to debate and they were getting together often now with no agenda other than fellowship and the common adversities they were currently sharing. Each believed that the Lord Jesus was present and superintending all things that transpired. They even found a way to pray together sometimes, focusing on their joint confidence that the Lord was listening to them.

To Governor Lucille Grimley, the whole state capital area seemed to be binding together in ways she could never have imagined or legislated through governance, education, or increased public funding of social programs. Good things were happening, quite apart from any official community efforts or new policies. There was no doubt that the City of Santa Fe had drawn together more because of the events that had swept over the city. People were friendlier and looking out for each other more. She remembered reading long ago about the City of London during the Blitz in 1940 and 1941 when London and sixteen other cities endured German bombing. The effect on morale was paradoxical. Fear and depression set in because of the horrendous losses, especially in London. A determined and gritty resolve set in among the Londoners, bringing people together in previously unimagined ways to help each other. It is easy, she pondered, to focus on the bad. That came too naturally. But she also remembered the ways communities reacted after 9/11. She remembered too, the strange and unexpected ways people adapted to the pandemic of the early 2020s. Somehow, those stories were an inspiration to Governor Grimley now, as her own city had come under siege.



The strange things that seemed to be going on with her daughter, Maegan, also had a catalytic effect on the governor herself. *I don't think we're just animals, scratching about for the last crumb on the mesa,* she thought. *Something more has been going on—and I'm not sure what.*

* * * * *

Karen Asnat felt herself to be in the background of the drama that was going on in Santa Fe. She remained close to Jim Pappas, and they seemed to fall more deeply in love as the weeks passed. Recently she liked going to Alamos Brew by herself, and if no one was using one of the meeting rooms, she would sit alone at a table with a warm beverage and read. The coffee shop had several bookshelves with all kinds of books that had been donated. The shop had a loose policy of give a book, take a book.

On this day she noted the book that Cantor Rafael Donner had told her about some months before, *Religious Affections* by Jonathan Edwards. She pulled the worn paperback copy down and opened it to the first page. There was the name *Rafael* written in pencil. Apparently, the cantor had finished reading it and donated it to The Brew. She settled into a chair and began to read.

Edwards was not easy reading, but rich and deeply intuitive. His thoughts drew her heart towards the God of whom Edwards was speaking. She wanted nothing of falseness or self-deception in her faith. She wanted only true affections, as the American Puritan called them. But Karen was also a realist and knew that such depth and cleanness of faith would take years more. Edwards's descriptions of the heart of a true believer seemed like a distant horizon. And yet still, a contentment and peacefulness filled her heart as she sat reading over her coffee. She wondered, *Am I really living in Santa Fe, New Mexico? Am I tethered to this world? I don't really belong here.* She shook off that thought. She had her job, her new friends born of the Hit-G crisis, her Jim, and her startling memories of The Letter. Then there was the angelic visitation. Deep in her soul she knew there was a plan at work in her life; it was working around her and through her, and there was a place for her in this town and in this time. *What comes later, will be for later.*

* * * * *

Heather Marcos had made her way to São Paulo, in a new and mostly disguised appearance. She wanted to make herself evident to Professor Hernández without openly approaching him. It did not take long. She was wandering the display cases in his office building when he passed and noticed her. He quietly came in behind her and said, “Good evening, young lady, do you like our research?” She was startled but kept her composure and said, “Yes, it is fascinating.”

A small laugh, and he said, “I can show you more in my office at six o’clock this evening, if you like. We have a new graduate program in which you might be interested.”

“That would be of great interest to me, sir,” she said. “I would like to learn how application is made.” She smiled and moved on.

It was a clean first contact, except for one thing: she was being carefully observed by a studious young air cadet, in uniform, busy with his laptop and textbooks, looking every bit disinterested in their brief conversation. He was very interested though and had been given a briefing of the plan to learn of the plasmatized restructuring weapon through this new double agent.

The professor went to his office and closed the door. Heather sat at a table and looked at a physics journal and the air cadet got up to leave. He packed his laptop away, glided by Heather and dropped a small piece of paper carefully on the floor next to her. The cadet exited at the elevator. Heather waited for a couple of minutes, looked down and deftly picked up the paper. It had a numerical sequence written on it:  #-9-3-9-8-1-1-4-3-8-@

The sequence was the password to the professor’s desktop computer. She replaced the journal in the rack of periodicals, then casually left her book bag on the table. She wandered around a moment then took the elevator down to get a cup of coffee. Her bag was prepared with certain items authenticating her false identity as a scholar. It also contained a small Beretta handgun—which any gang member who inspected her bag would probably have expected to find.

She returned with a cup of coffee and, acting tired, lay her head on the table to take a nap in the way that students so often did. Just before six o’clock, her watch



buzzed and woke her. She sat up, straightened herself and went to the professor’s door and knocked. It opened, and she entered his office with a smile on her face.

* * * * *

Hernández and Heather/Maria sat across his desk from each other. She sipped her coffee and he nursed an alcoholic beverage.

“It is good to see you, Maria,” the professor said.

“And you, professor,” Heather said and smiled. She glanced around the office suite as if scanning for something then said, “I am glad for the opportunity you have granted me for Physics admission.”

Hernández laughed, and said, “Fear not, Maria, this office is clean. There are no nasty little listening accessories that might change our topic of discussion. We are safe.”

“That is a big relief. I am tired of being watched,” the woman said.

“Understandable—you have had many eyes on you and for a while,” he affirmed.

She was ready to end the charade. “Professor, can you tell me where we go from here?” Heather asked. “Are you aware of our Ogden associate’s demise?”

The professor looked at her straight. He studied her for a moment, got up from his chair and walked to the whiteboard. He gave no acknowledgement of Francis Xappa’s death. On the white board was drawn a rough map of what she recognized as Santa Fe, New Mexico as a grid of streets and some crude topography. There were also red dots in what looked like random locations. There were no words or labels. He stood and stared at the board, and she came over and stood next to him, wondering what she was looking at. “What is this?” she asked.

“This, my dear, is where we go from here,” he said smugly. “These are the locations where my associates in Santa Fe tell me that those ridiculous Cavern Fellowships are having their idiotic gatherings. I intend to bring down a wrath of justice upon them,” he pointed to the iPad on his desk and laughed again. Heather was getting tired of that laugh.

“Forgive me, but I do not understand,” was all she could say as a chill ran through her.

“Observe,” he said. He touched the keyboard of his desktop computer, flicked another switch on his desk that activated an overhead data projector that was mounted in the ceiling. The computer screen showed the same map and now the ceiling device became a sweep of a simple animation from one red dot to another of what was similar to a flashlight beam. As the beam passed by each red dot, the projector added a larger black dot over the red dot. The professor chuckled to himself yet again. Some stratagems had been programmed into the computer and Heather could only guess what.

Heather played along. “Show me how this works,” she said with command in her voice. Inside she felt fear but she acted the part of a full collaborator. “This is interesting,” she added.

“As the orbital device moves into view-finding coordinates, as I determine, it will plasmatize the parameter boundary that I designate,” he said.

“Excuse me?” she replied, only half lost in what he said. “Do you mean they get blue-flamed?” which was her own term.

“If you wish,” the professor acquiesced and continued. “I can enter multiple coordinates for a single event. In which case, the recipients of this marvelous technology will be beamed into space to join the previous recipients.”

“And to be clear, professor, when they are ‘beamed’ as you say, they cannot be re-beamed back to seek out the creator of this ‘technology’ to prosecute him for his invention?”

Again, the laugh, this time with a deeper growl. “No indeed, for you see, my dear, in space they are dead. There is no oxygen, no pressure or gravity to hold them together and no coming back to life. Their miserable existence has ended there. Their chemical/matter makeups float along with other space debris.” At this point he looked nothing short of evil.



*Screegion was there. Screegion, in fact, was in Professor Hernández. The demon could project its own foul voice through the larynx of the human and while the human host was aware of the demon’s presence in a catatonic way, he was powerless to contend with the possession. Heather knew none of this, of course.*

Heather was beginning to feel frightened at this moment but she feigned her own rage. “This is a good thing, professor. It will complete your revenge. And mine. Can I assist in any way, and is there a schedule?” She also noticed a particularly foul odor that had emanated from somewhere. She ignored it.

*Screegion saw an ally now and backed away. The professor regained use of his own thoughts and voice. He appeared no different but relaxed.*

“Yes, you may. Our organization still has use for you, and as I believe you have come to see, will grace you with significant compensation for your troubles,” again with the strange chuckle. “If you sit here, I will orient you to the operative sequence. It is quite elegantly simple.” He got up and invited her to sit at the computer and handed her the iPad.

Heather took the pad and touched the glass, expecting it to activate. It did not.

Puzzled, she looked at the professor and raised her eyebrows, inquiring.

He told her to pinch the screen, which she did. It came on, and then he said, “In the box you will see a keyboard window. Punch in exactly as I tell you: hashtag 9 3 9 8 1 1 4 3 8 @. If anyone mistypes there is no correcting, the iPad will self-destruct. That is my fourth iPad,” and he laughed yet again.

She entered the sequence correctly, and the screen changed now to what looked like a Google Earth view. Instinctively she pinched it again and the screen enlarged. As she did this several times, the view zoomed in more and more, losing no resolution. She kept pinching and was amazed at how crisp and clear the views appeared.

“Now, enter these coordinates as I give them to you: & 9 3 ! G X D I E 0,” Heather complied, smiling. “Now pinch the screen down to what I have targeted,” and Heather did this too.

There in front of her was Bob Cohen's RV. She could not restrain her surprise and sat back.

"A bit squeamish, my dear? Here allow me," and he took the iPad. He flicked his fingers few times, and they watched the RV turn blue and then disappear. The professor raised a single eyebrow and laid the iPad on the desk. "Hopefully," he said, "that pesky fellow is now orbital."

Heather was shaken but with great strength managed to not react. She managed to say, "Good riddance."

"You see, Maria, my plan is to sterilize that town from all these troublemakers to our cause. There are many others of course, you know. The usual law enforcement and governmental interlopers and leeches. They will eventually join the others, but for now, we'll take care of these idiotic religious conservatives. Oh, how I hate them," the professor groaned.

"As do I, sir," the woman said. She was not sure she was convincing, but she needed to stay in his confidence if she and Julianna were to have a future.

* * * * *

Where there was once an RV in a parking lot in Santa Fe, New Mexico, not far from the Santa Maria Chapel, there was now a hole in the ground. It was not a large hole, nothing near the strange cubic-foot displacement of the sites of the former churches. It was a clean cut, like a large excavator might make with its bucket. Santa Fe Day journalist Bob Cohen had not been inside when this happened. He had been with Mindy McConnell in his Jeep about a hundred yards away. They saw the blue glow and knew what was transpiring in front of their eyes. They were stunned at watching it. They knew they could just as easily have been inside.

Cohen composed himself first and said, "I never much liked that stupid wagon anyway." But he was shocked that it and all his worldly possessions were now gone. All he had left was one handgun and his Jeep.



Mindy grabbed his arm and pulled him close. She was truly terrified. "This can happen to anyone and at any time, Bob. We've got to stop it," and she started to cry.

"We will, Mindy. We have a plant and I think that person is capable of getting to the bottom of this. That is all I can say. Maybe prayers are in order for the people of our town to somehow be protected?" Cohen offered.

She looked at him, wiping her tears, and said, "What? Did I hear you say something about prayers? Who are you and what have you done with the real Bob Cohen?"

He got out of the Jeep, donned a cowboy hat—something he rarely wore but oddly thought it prudent in case anyone was watching him. He went to the side of the hole and Mindy joined him.

"I have never denied that prayer in scary moments can be a good thing, Mindy. Don't get me wrong—I'm probably not going to start singing church songs. But if there is one thing we have seen, it is that the praying people have been protected. They're not immune from attack and I know that at the nursing facility those people died. But prayer seems to . . . intervene?"

Mindy was quiet. *This guy is changing,* she thought. It made her feel good. "Since you don't have a home now, you better come over to my place. I'll fix us some soup." Cohen dutifully obeyed.

* * * * *

Avon Duvall, Father Portacomaro, and the governor joined Cohen and McConnell at the new ditch, as Cohen called it. They stood and looked in, not seeing much. There was no honey-like smell and the governor's aides were nervous for her to be there out in the open. Their eyes scanned the area carefully. Two state police cruisers were working their way around slowly, watching also.

"You are apparently a person of interest, Bob," said the governor dryly.

"Yes, Madam Governor, and I would like to get off their list," was all Bob could say.

“Bob, I can find you a place to stay, and perhaps the governor can replace some of your possessions,” the priest added.

Duvall said, “Madam Governor, we need to end this assault on our citizens. How can I help, or the state police?” He was clearly frustrated, and weary of not being able to offer any defense against unforeseen targets.

Governor Grimley walked around the ditch. “Officer, as you know, a plan is in play.” She looked at the priest, who was not part of the team. “Father,” she said, Could you excuse us for a moment?” The priest’s eyebrow raised, but he walked back to his vehicle.

“Avon, the agent we have recruited is on the move. We do not know how successful she can be or will be. But that is our best play at the moment. Remaining vigilant and watchful of the gang’s assets here is your role now. That is all we can do. Bob, do you have a roof?”

“Yes ma’am, Ms. McConnell has offered me her spare bedroom,” Cohen answered.

“I am sure,” and she laughed, as did Duvall.

“There is no hanky-panky, ma’am” Cohen said with a false tone of insult. “We are good friends, yes. But I am not taking advantage of her. Besides, I need to get a new place, a new computer, and some new gear.”

“Yes, I am sure. Apologies,” the governor said. “I can provide a computer, but as for gear, perhaps Trooper Duvall can assist you. I do not need to thank you for your service throughout this ordeal, and I am grateful.”

“Yes indeed, ma’am. I can do so,” Duvall said.

At that moment Carlos approached and quietly said, “Ma’am, I think it is best for us to get moving.”

“Yes, Carlos, we are going now,” the governor responded.



They all looked around one last time then got into their vehicles and drove off. They all felt like a page was being turned in the drama. Things couldn’t go on like this much longer.

105

The people from the four evangelical churches that had been spared the loss of their buildings—Grace Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Faith Baptist Church, Mercy Baptist Tabernacle, and Peace Lutheran Church—had become very sheepish about having a high profile in the Hit-G story. They had avoided interviews by any media people and their pastors and leaders did not have much personal contact with any of the Hit-G leaders. But they prayed for those congregations, perhaps more than one would have expected. Through e-mail and text messages they kept abreast of what the Hit-G churches were doing. They were not aware of meeting locations but wished to be discreet support for the beleaguered congregations.

The Cavern Fellowship pastors appreciated that below-the-radar support. In short, a fresh and unprecedented unity had grown amongst these churches. It was a grass-roots kind of awareness of needs and a willingness to provide some of those basic needs of the Hit-G fellowships: supplies, chairs, IT support, and congregational meals. As the four churches who still had meeting-place integrity became aware of each other they became a sort of Hit-G auxiliary. It was strange for the Orthodox Presbyterian pastor to have become friends with the Lutheran pastor and unlikely for the two Baptist pastors to become coffee-buddies. Fathers Portacomaro and Clark had even had coffee at Alamos Brew with the Lutheran pastor and Clark quietly remarked to Portacomaro, “Isn’t this peculiar?” All had indicated a sense that something unusual was happening.

* * * * *

Jim Pappas decided to make a study of Bob Cohen’s former RV site. He requisitioned the TruPulse 360 Laser Rangefinder again and surveyed the hole where Cohen’s home used to be. The only interesting finding was that the space comprised a precise 15,000 cubic feet, exactly one tenth of the Hit-G caverns. Pappas thought that remarkable. “Why this precision?” he wondered. He was getting tired of more questions than answers over the length of this saga. *But at*

*least I got a marvelous fiancé, out of it all,* he reflected, and sent up a quick prayer of thanks to God.

He reported his latest research to Karen Asnat that evening over dinner. “It is interesting that Bob’s site is exactly one tenth the volume of all the churches’ holes,” he said. “What could that mean?”

“A new mystery to add to all the others,” Karen noted. “I read a verse in the Bible this morning, would you like to hear it?”

“Of course, dearest, nothing pleases me more than to hear your voice speak from the scriptures,” he said, with drama.

She smiled then accessed the Bible on her phone, swiping and touching the screen to the verse she wanted to share: “For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. Amos 3:7,” she recited. “I know it is not about us and all we’ve been seeing, but I still think it is somehow important that God does reveal secrets sometimes.”

“Prophet James and Prophetess Karen explore the deep mysteries of the Lord,” Pappas spoke, in an official sounding tone of voice.

“I know, Jim, not to take a Bible verse out of context and try to apply it randomly. But I think the Lord will show us eventually why all the things that we have seen have occurred,” she reasoned.

“Yes, I think so too, and I wish someone could explain all these mysteries,” Pappas mused.

Karen, at that moment, pulled out the strange letter from her purse. She handled it gingerly, as if it might evaporate right in her hands. She unfolded it, and read again, “And this wisdom for you the mystery unfolds with light but exults with trust.” The words recited, brought tears to both of their eyes.

“I don’t know when the mystery of all this will be resolved. Maybe we are supposed to keep trusting God and as we get more and more understanding, it will gradually make sense.”



“What does the word, ‘exult’ mean?” he asked.

“Kind of like ‘rejoice’ I think,” she answered.

“An angel was specifically communicating with you, in the letter, that the more you trust God, the more ‘light’ you will get and joy somehow happens at the same time?” he said.

Karen laughed. “I think so. Your guess is as good as mine.”

“But I want all the answers now,” he said, raising his voice.

“So do I,” she said. “But then we wouldn’t have to trust, would we. So, we wait, and trust and keep thinking it all through.”

Pappas said, “I’m tired of all this thinking. Can’t that angel just show up and tell us the story?”

Karen shrugged.

*Kuriosagapa was there, watching, listening, feeling great love for the two. Then, he was gone—summoned to a new need elsewhere.*

* * * * *

Bob Cohen seemed to be able to access an inexhaustible set of resources to replenish his own needs for weaponry. Even with the dramatic disappearance of his RV with all its contents, he was again in possession of three handguns and two AR-15 style rifles with plenty of ammunition. These were mostly in his Jeep, but one was in Mindy McConnell’s house as a backup. Mindy herself, seemed to be ever evolving, or was it devolving, she wondered, in this season of tribulation for Santa Fe, New Mexico. It did not seem that long ago when she was a thoroughgoing progressive, excited to root out and publish stories for her employer about social injustice, climate deterioration at the hands of an ever-greedy industrial-complex, exploitation and oppression of women, and other tales that supported her own political agenda. Now, she found herself reading a periodical about firearms, having

new doubts about some of the stories posted by her own agency colleagues, and feeling wondrous love for a man who was her polar opposite. Sitting on her couch—with Cohen at the kitchen table unboxing one of his new rifles—she smiled to herself, *What a traitor, I am*, and she meditated. They had decided to attend church that morning, and it was time to leave for the service.

Earlier that morning, nine different vehicles filled with *Demônios Elevados* soldiers were converging on Santa Fe, New Mexico. Their stealth, as a group, was well-planned and clever. Even with a generally watchful law enforcement community, the nine vehicles were low profile, average looking cars and vans. None drew any attention, and each transported three men. Each man was well-armed and even though their vehicles were unremarkable, the sophistication of their weaponry was state-of-the-art. They were a very dangerous and well-organized brigade; in fact, they called themselves *brigade relâmpago,* lightning brigade. Their mission was freshly received by their lieutenant. It had come from São Paulo, Brazil by special courier—not electronic communique, but a single printed document. It aimed to follow-up on a major devastation that was soon to be unleashed upon the community. It was *o êxtase escuro,* the dark rapture.

The *relâmpago* soldiers were not read in on what that meant, just well-paid to carry out some very specific instructions. Their lieutenant knew what was forthcoming, but their mission was to set up two-man assassination squads close to several predesignated addresses around the city. As public officials responded to the *êxtase escuro*, the sniper teams would eliminate as many as three victims per site, and then make their escape through pre-routed paths. Management, as the São Paulo team called themselves, hoped to eliminate a number of Santa Fe's most prominent law enforcement officers and perhaps even more senior elected officials. As such, a path would be cleared in the chaos for a rapid and profitable intensification of their business in that part of New Mexico.

*Screegion watched the teams converge on Santa Fe and thought to itself, "Where would these stooges be but for my giving them a strategy."*

Cohen and McConnell attended a worship service being held by the New Beginnings Christian Fellowship. She was writing a series of pieces for CNN about the churches who had lost their buildings and were roving around from location to location. She did not identify the locations of course; it was a human-interest series



focusing on the feelings of the people and their spiritual interpretations of what was happening to them. It was not a typical CNN topic but she was well-known enough that her managers sensed that viewers would patronize this focused approach. She was also aware of Maegan Grimley's brilliant architectural output, having generated full plans for twenty church buildings. But she did not write about Maegan. She kept that detail to herself.

Cohen, that morning, found the sermon and the whole church experience a little boring. They were meeting in a furniture store showroom on that Sunday, and he was half-mindedly watching out the showroom front window. What he saw woke him up. An old olive drab colored Volvo had driven by the facility three times. It had what looked to Cohen like three occupants. That got his attention now. He nudged McConnell to look outside as the car passed for a fourth time. During the closing hymn, they each got up and moved slowly to the door to watch outside. Now, for a fifth time the car drove by slowly. As the service concluded, Cohen moved to the pastor, Stephen Menendez, and said quietly, "A Volvo has passed the entrance five times now, Pastor."

A look of concern hit the pastor's face, and he motioned Bruce Philipsburg over to his side, smiling so as not to draw attention from the lingering congregation. Cohen quietly repeated his concern to Philipsburg who then went to the window to view the road too.

*Kuriosagapa was there; he pointed to a car and somehow Philipsburg focused his view on it.*

Cohen then texted Trooper Avon Duvall whom he knew was attending Santa Fe Christian Assembly's service, meeting that day in a large tent on the grounds of their former church. Duvall was attending as a courtesy, providing a quiet security presence for the church; he was not in uniform. He started watching the road there and he noticed a beat-up brown Ford Taurus with tinted windows passing by more than once. He texted Cohen back. Then he texted his watch officer, who notified several other troopers who were on overwatch at other Cavern Fellowships. Something was up.

* * * * *

In his office at the university in São Paulo, Professor João Manuel Hernández was tapping his iPad. The Amazônia-1 satellite, two hundred miles above, had gone active and was positioning itself to a particular orbital orientation. It's plasma-restructuring emitter was pointing towards Santa Fe, New Mexico. *Now, the Great Opera shall commence,* Hernández said to himself, and he began humming an aria from *Il Guarany*, a famous Brazilian romantic opera. Hernández loved Brazilian opera.

A quiet knock on his door startled him and he said, "Come in."

Heather Marcos entered and took it upon herself to sit across from him at his desk. "Is the event beginning?" she asked.

"Yes, my dear," Hernández replied. "Do you know opera at all?"

"I love opera, sir," she said and then in a musical voice sang the same phrase in Spanish, *amo la ópera*.

The professor smiled and said, "I am full of passion," and stood up and turned his desktop monitor towards the young woman.

Heather saw a complex matrix of windows on the screen. Perhaps ten places were in view, from what looked like top-down aerial perspectives. A small flashing cursor centered in the middle of each window. Hernández then sang, *os tolos morrerão,* the fools shall die.

Marcos knew what was transpiring and decided that now was the moment she had planned. She pulled out of her purse a small Beretta Px4 Storm JSX9F21 subcompact. It had a custom machined noise suppression barrel. With no look on her face at all, she pointed it at the professor and squeezed off four shots into his chest. The professor gave a look of shock, then fell to the floor. Blood seeped from the wounds onto the carpet.

*Screegion was not present but somehow felt the transfer of a living soul into oblivion, an address where the dark world counted victories. They did not actually score victories by ending human life, but they celebrated deaths of all without saving knowledge of the Savior. The demon grimaced but did not know the greater*



*story that halted the professor's life. The Amazônia-1 contraption was not his department. It was more the domain of the Archas, and Screegion did not encroach there. It knew better.*

The woman somehow imagined that she should turn Hernández's body over to limit the blood flow, a thing which did not actually matter. He expired in about two minutes. Heather stood and looked at the man she had just murdered. She felt no remorse, a thing which puzzled her. She then texted a certain number and into the office came a young student/air cadet. His name was André Ferreira.

He looked at her and said, "What have you done?" in case any recording was going on. She said nothing. The young cadet/student and the former network administrator collected themselves. They had two tasks. Sterilize the crime scene and pack up the professor's equipment, which meant his desktop computer and iPad. These the cadet would surrender as soon as possible to his air force uncle, who would know what to do with them.

Ferreira first said, "Give me the weapon," which she was happy to do. He stuffed it under his belt behind his back. Then he retrieved several thick black plastic bags from his backpack. The two then grabbed the desktop tower, keyboard, mouse and monitor and double-bagged them. They placed the iPad in a separate bag along with a couple of small flash drives that were on the desk too. Out of his backpack he pulled an Apple mini, a small keyboard and monitor and plugged them in where the other desktop had been. They stood looking and wondering what else they could seize for the benefit of the nation of Brazil's integrity and security?

She said, "There must be papers or documents about this technology?"

"I am sure there are," Ferreira said, "But we will leave that for other investigators. I am sure there is some sort of surveillance too."

Marcos then said, "He told me his office is clean of any of that."

"Let's store this material and then call in the . . . event, shall we? We will report it as we rehearsed it. Then you need to go dark, if you know what I mean" the cadet said.

She took a last look at the dead scholar and *Demônios* leader. She still felt no remorse. She had taken a life but she had prevented the taking of who knows how many Santa Fe citizens, including the church people who had been kind to Juliana. The trade-off seemed reasonable to her. But she entertained no delusions that the ruse would permanently fool her *Demônios* mates. They would figure out soon enough what had happened. Hopefully, she would be long gone by then.

Ferreira handled the two plastic bag bundles and left with his backpack on. She was able to steel herself and then when the young man was gone, she went outside the office, took a deep breath, and let out a blood-curdling scream. She stood and tears—real tears, for the release of what she had done—came down her face. She braced herself against the wall. Soon two students came running from the other end of the floor. They saw the body, the blood, and the look on Heather Marcos's face. One pulled out his cell phone and dialed Campus Security. In three minutes, two uniformed officers came running down the hall, saw the scene, decided there was no active shooter, and tried to calm Heather and the two students. Heather acted inconsolable, but calmed herself, telling a confusing story which seemed plausible enough to the officers. The two students were also stunned.

* * * * *

André Ferreira made it to the street and ducked into an alley. He had hidden two large, non-descript duffle bags which had *Instituto de Energia e Ambiente da USP* stenciled on them, as any student might have. He quickly put each black bag into the duffle bags and zipped them closed. He then called his uncle. He saw no one who might have observed his exit from the Physics building and moved slowly so as not to attract attention. He had the two bags of equipment and waited for Capitão Breno Lucas to arrive. He pulled up to the alley, motioned his nephew to get in and put the two bundles into the back seat. They then drove off, saying nothing to each other. As they drove, the captain opened his hand to the cadet, who placed the Beretta into it. As they drove over a bridge over the Pinheiros River, the pilot stopped briefly and tossed the weapon into the water. He watched to make sure it hit the water, then continued on.

Lucas drove them to a pre-planned place, a small, non-descript warehouse a few miles off campus, with a garage door which Lucas opened by remote, and drove his car in. He closed the door behind him and sat at the steering wheel for moment,



let out a deep breath and looked at his nephew. "Let's see what we've found" he said.

They got out and took the bags to a table that looked like a test bench. They connected the computer to power and booted it up. Ferreira turned on the iPad, and worked at seeing how it would sync with the desktop. All the items were working, so they powered them down and replaced them into the duffels.

"Did the professor mind your borrowing his invention?" the captain asked.

"I think it is safe to say that he does not mind now. Better you know nothing more, uncle," was all Ferreira offered.

*"Que assim seja*," so be it, Lucas responded. "We shall take it from there. I trust this acquisition will yield a great benefit to our country, André." The young cadet nodded, and walked out of the small building, entrusting much to his uncle.

Ferreira on the one hand was complicit in the murder of a major national figure. He had stolen a significant and consequential haul of university property and probably broke several other laws. But on the other hand, he felt no guilt for any of that, and was in fact proud of himself. He knew what diabolical crime he had assisted in blocking and that he would never get a medal for the act. He had mixed feelings about Ms. Marcos, but she was out of his vision now and her fate would be decided by other forces. He went back to his apartment, drank two glasses of wine, and went to bed.

The *Força Aérea Brasileira* pilot transported his cache to his base and turned it over to a small team of several superiors who were awaiting delivery. He knew that this was how it had to be. He wasn't sure he completely trusted his own countrymen with such advanced destructive power, since *Brasilien* was a very volatile country these days. But since his USAF counterparts did understand the value, he had to trust in their command-level cooperation to terminate any evil uses for it.

* * * * *

The *Demônios* sniper teams were positioned and concealed as planned. They awaited whatever the dark rapture was, having been told it would be obvious and

would be the signal to engage their tactical mission. It was a beautiful morning as the various church services around the city ended and the people began to depart. The snipers focused their scopes on various targets but observed no unusual or obvious signals. Unknown to them were law enforcement officers near to each Cavern Fellowship service, on overwatch to preempt an attack.

Cohen and McConnell left the furniture store showroom, shook a few hands, and looked around. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, although Cohen was certainly scanning for that olive-drab Volvo. It was nowhere to be seen. He checked his cell phone for any alerts but there were none. “Nothing looks out of place, maybe I’m crazy,” he muttered to McConnell.

She was not in a humorous mood and said, “Let’s get to the Jeep.” They drove down the street fifty yards or so from the showroom and then Cohen spotted the Volvo, parked in an alley off the main road between a couple of two-story adobe buildings with open windows. There it is,” he said. Instinctively a plan popped to his head and he said, “Let’s look around.” McConnell didn’t object.

They drove around the corner and parked. He carefully placed two handguns on his person, concealed. Mindy checked hers which was in a shoulder holster under a leather fringed jacket. “Sexy,” was all Cohen commented. She said, “Shut up, sailor.”

She grabbed his arm and hugged him, pretending they were on a romantic stroll. Each wore a hat, masking their identity. They walked slowly from the Jeep past one of the adobe buildings. As they passed a double-door, Cohen quietly tried the handle. It was open. He looked at Mindy and motioned inside and she nodded. He glanced up towards one of the open windows and spied the tip of a rifle barrel. Trained snipers knew never to let their barrel stick out of a window lest it be visible. *This hombre evidently had missed that lecture in his training,* Cohen thought.

They eased into the large room, empty except for a few scattered boxes and large appliances cartons. Cohen motioned to McConnell to get into one of them. She looked at him like, *surely you jest?* He sternly motioned again and she complied. Then he moved near a flight of stairs, checked a step to see if it creaked. It did. She watched him nervously. He didn’t ascend and moved to a dark corner and motioned her to get down, inside the box. It never occurred to her to doubt the



advisability of accompanying him. She knew what was at stake. She pulled her handgun from the holster but did not rack the slide lest the noise be heard.

Cohen sent a quick text to Duvall: **In a building on Clark, around corner from Jackalope Furniture. Saw rifle barrel.** He waited a couple of minutes, then he grabbed some of the boxes and threw them around, making noise which got the attention of someone upstairs. Muffled voices. Footsteps on ceiling. Then, from behind a door came a soldier with a small machine pistol aimed at him.

“Drop it, cop,” said the person to Cohen before he could turn fully around. Cohen dropped the Glock he was holding and slowly raised his arms. The soldier said nothing more but called upstairs, “*Hombre!*” Two men clomped down the stairs, one carrying a sniper rifle and the other sporting a large handgun.

“Turn around,” the soldier commanded Cohen, who obeyed. “You’re on my list, friend. Now I don’t have to find you,” he sneered.

Then a racking pistol slide was heard and a woman rolled out of a box, took aim, and pumped two rounds into the soldier. Cohen fell quickly, grabbed his Glock, and fired one shot at the pistol-holding shooter on the stairs, and another at the rifleman. All three were on the floor, writhing.

Cohen got up and kicked the rifle away. The machine pistol was still in the grasp of the first soldier but he was too stunned to do anything with it. McConnell had aimed for his lower abdomen and both rounds had found home. She stood and grabbed the machine pistol out of his grasp and said nothing.

She looked at Cohen who nodded and texted Duvall: **Three shooters down. Need assistance.**

Cohen and McConnell gathered up the weapons, patted the would-be assailants for other weapons, and found a small machete. They sat near to the three wounded soldiers, pointing their pistols at the heads of two. The sniper team members were in great pain but said nothing. No event had occurred with which they could have commenced their attack, and they had one prominent member of the law enforcement community in the sights of the sniper rifle: a state trooper who was standing outside. No *êxtase escuro*. Dark rapture averted.

* * * * *

The governor was not much of a church goer, but with the heads-up about an impending attack, she attended church this Sunday with her daughter Maegan at the Southwest Evangelical Free Church, a church name which the governor didn't really understand and thought way too cumbersome to say. Her aides, Carlos and Bill, were present too, they even dressed up so as not to attract attention. "Gentlemen," she had quietly remarked, "You're both looking very churchy." Neither changed their expression, just scanned the large room of the movie theater where they were meeting that morning.

Governor Grimley had not explained to her daughter why she was attending this day, and Maegan did not ask her mother. She was happy to have her mom with her. Pastor Ethan's wife, Guinevere, sat with the governor and daughter and was very welcoming. She had a disarming way about her and the governor thought, *I could get to like this woman.* The pastor was on the stage leading the service, which Maegan focused on but her mother was distracted. The governor showed no nervousness, just watched all around as did her aides, but nothing happened.

After the closing song, a haunting tune that the governor noted from the church bulletin was entitled, "The Wonder of the Cross," written by somebody named Robin Mark, and a closing prayer, all were dismissed. She and Maegan made their way towards the entrance. They were met by three state troopers, who spoke to Carlos who then led the governor's party immediately to the projection booth. They could see out as people were leaving but there was no commotion. Carlos said, "The troopers were alerted to expect an attack, Madam Governor. We need to stay in here until we get an all-clear. He had his handgun drawn, which frightened Maegan.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Carlos said there was concern of some trouble but there were troopers posted outside. "It'll be okay," was all he had to say, watching his cell phone for any new messages.



They heard no shots fired or anything sounding like an attack. Carlos got an all-clear text and opened the door. Most of the worshippers were gone now, and Pastor Ethan and his wife were standing at the door. A SWAT van had arrived and three men had been apprehended and hooded. They were placed into the van and taken off.

"That was what we were concerned about, Madam Governor," Carlos said and radioed to Bill to bring the governor's new Suburban High Country around. It was a beautiful truck with armor that had been specially installed and bullet-proof glass. The governor, her daughter, and Carlos jumped in and were taken to the capitol building garage.

As they pulled in, Grimley said to her daughter, "Dear, why don't you get out here and go upstairs. I want to do an errand first."

Her daughter looked at her askance for a moment but knew not to dispute the decision. "Alright," she said, kissed her mom on the cheek and got out, escorted by a trooper to the elevator.

"Take me to where they were taking those men, Carlos," she said to her aide.

Carlos said, "Why, ma'am?"

"I want to speak with them," she said.

"Yes ma'am," the aide said and they drove off for state police headquarters. She expected the FBI to be there too, which they were. When she arrived, Carlos escorted her into the facility, past the checkpoint where there was no question as to their identities and were met by an agent they had not met before. He presented his badge, and a business card which read, "M. STURTZENBECHER, SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR."

"Alright, Mr. Sturtzenbecher, where are the perps?" she asked.

"They are being held in Interview Rooms 2, 3, and 5, Madam Governor," he said, blankly, like he had done this kind of thing countless times. "You would like to listen to the interviews, I take it?"

“I want to do an interview, sir,” and said it so sternly the FBI officer deferred easily.

“Very well, ma’am, your prerogative, of course. They have been given their rights and entry info recorded. They were not very talkative,” the agent said.

“I imagine not,” the governor said. “Shall we get on with it?”

“Yes ma’am,” the agent said. “Who we think was the captain of this team, is in Room 2. He says his name is Ronaldo, but we don’t know if that is correct or not. I will be there too, as well as your aide,” and he nodded to Carlos.

The governor, Mr. Sturtzenbecher, and Carlos entered the locked interview room door, and sat down across from the young, South American man. He looked at them with daggers, pure hatred.

“Ronaldo, is it?” said the governor. “You are charged with several acts of terrorism. Do you speak English?”

“I do,” replied the young man.

“Do you know what we do with terrorists?” she asked. He said nothing and smirked.

She went on. “We know you were part of a larger plan to assassinate citizens of Santa Fe today. It has not succeeded. And we will . . . deconstruct you and your partners until we learn what we need to know. I am interested in the larger plan, if you care to share any of it. You will not be escaping, and your life as you knew it is now over. You can only help yourself from here on in.” Still, he was unmoved and gave no reaction.

At this point, the FBI agent added, “We will determine your real identity and be able to find out if you have family around. Anywhere. Our search capabilities, Ronaldo, are every bit as impressive as you might imagine. We shall find anyone related to you and they will become part of our . . . reaction. Unless of course, you care to enlighten us.”

“Your compadres are a sophisticated organization,” the governor went on. “We respect your tactics and planning. But most of you in this wave of terrorism are



being or will be apprehended. Your plan is defeated. Several of you are already in custody. I have a single question for you, sir,” she said with a sweet voice and detected the slightest change of expression in the man’s face.

“I want to know why the *Demônios Elevados* wishes to kill church people, religious people. Surely, you understand that they are no threat to your commercial enterprise?” But Ronaldo said nothing.

“Very well, then,” the governor said and she and the agent and Carlos left the room.

They had the same brief conversation with the other two men. With the third there was more of a reaction to the reference of family connections and the man seemed slightly unnerved at the mention.

None of the three team members revealed anything enlightening, so they were processed and transported to the city jail. The governor and her team returned to the capitol and spent the rest of the day in debriefings and a colloquium of sorts, studying and processing what they knew and why such a complex series of planned attacks was happening at this time.

* * * * *

The Brazilian Air Force *inteceptação de defesa,* defense interception team had been busy studying the package of confiscated equipment from the office of the late physics professor João Manuel Hernández, PhD. The iPad was of special interest because the team discovered that it was key to the whole plasmatized restructuring technology. The desktop, it was discovered, possessed the basic software for the phenomena of restructuring, or beaming. The iPad housed the code for accessing and aligning the Amazônia-1 satellite and for targeting multiple sites simultaneously. The team broke into study cohorts; some studied targeting; another group looked at power array and conversion technology on the satellite; and another group pondered the actual plasmatized firing mechanism. A fourth group had a more abstruse task: seeking an understanding of why the plot seemed to be aimed at religious sites.

Capitão Breno Lucas had been sent into the air in a brand-new Saab Gripen JAS39E jet fighter equipped with ULAR, upward-looking atmospheric radar. He was in radio contact with the defense interception team.

"*Defesa ao Vigilante 1*," the team controller radioed.

"*Vigilante 1, aqui*," Lucas responded.

Lucas was flying close to the service ceiling of his aircraft, just under 40,000 feet. His ULAR was aimed at the Amazônia-1 and he was observing its behavior. It was doing nothing. Lucas' Saab Gripen carried two RAM 1210 A-S missiles. They were painted in silver with the *Força Aérea Brasileira* logo.

These missiles were a new air-to-space defense weapon designed to be launched into space from fixed wing aircraft. Brazil was the only South American nation to possess them but had not used one in an offensive maneuver. Today that would change. Lucas painted the Amazônia-1 with the ULAR and without hesitation kicked off a RAM A-S. He then circled his location and repeated the same tactic with the other RAM. They each fell off their hard-points, fired up and flew off into the upper



atmosphere until Lucas lost sight of each. In about four minutes, the ULAR registered first a strike and then two minutes later, another. The satellite silently burst with the first hit, as there is no sound where there is no atmosphere, and then what was left completely disintegrated with the second. The force beam laser with its incredible plasmatized restructuring capability was gone. What was left was a cloud of fluroantimonic HSbF6 acid, lazily floating in orbit, until it dissipated about fifteen minutes later. For now, the story of a menacing Amazônia-1 weapon lurking over Santa Fe, or anywhere else, was *terminada.*

At another uber-atmospheric address, there still orbited the remains of twenty ecclesiastical buildings, a single-family dwelling, a nursing-home foyer, the roof of a building, and one very lonely looking, beat-up recreational vehicle. The restructured Hit-G spaces could not be undone and on the ground, the holes in the ground still lay open, gathering weeds, leaves, and other desert flotsam and jetsam.

106

General Mario Haldeman of US Space Command became aware that the Brazilian Air Force captured the Amazônia-1, destroyed it, and the implications for several eventualities. For the moment, he was relieved for the passing of the immediate threat. He called New Mexico's governor and informed her that the threat of attack was now gone and gave her an all-clear. She informed him that many terrorists had been apprehended, apparently having been tasked with a number of assassinations. None had occurred; however, it was now known that Brazil possessed a technology of incredible significance. This would alter the balance of power in the western hemisphere if not globally. Although one of the largest and most populated nations in South America, Brazil was not given to being the most politically stable. General Haldeman and those in on what had happened, would be nervous about this for months to come.

On the other hand, the *Força Aérea Brasileira* personnel who were involved with the mission, and the relative ease with which it was accomplished, were ecstatic. It would be a windfall for their nation's esteem once the news became known in the South American family of nations.

When Capitão Breno Lucas landed his fighter, there was no parade, no marching band and no delegation of brass gathered to pin medals on his chest. With a feeling

of anticlimax, he taxied his airplane off the tarmac and into its hangar. He climbed out of the cockpit and down the ladder to the ground. Meeting him were the usual service personnel, his commanding officer and, to his surprise, Air Cadet André Ferreira. The CO said nothing, saluted, shook his hand, and said, “Get to debrief, Captain.” The cadet embraced his uncle, and said, “Congratulations Uncle, I am glad you are well and that you accomplished your mission.” Lucas smiled and wiped the sweat from his brow. It was perhaps the most important single military accomplishment for the nation of Brazil in a century, and it would receive no official publicity.

* * * * *

Heather Marcos was going by her real name again, for which her new papers verified her identity. Heather, a.k.a. Maria Juliet Namara Tomasia was now back in the United States, in Mammoth, California, in a new job as a reservations coordinator for a network of affiliated ski resorts. She had made no contact with her cousin, Julianna, but had heard from one FBI contact, identified simply as M, that her cousin was doing well, being protected, and that she, Maria, should move on with her life. She said that she understood, said goodbye, and immediately placed the phone on the floor and stomped it into many small pieces. She took the SIM card and burned it with a lighter. Perhaps, she had something of a life left after all.

* * * * *

Captain Philipsburg had been briefed on the destruction of the Brazilian satellite with its on-board weapon. He was told that the issue was settled at least for now, and he would be discharged from active duty and enlisted into the same Air National Guard unit in which he had previously served. He kept his new rank. His wife, Sarah, had never been prouder of him. They continued to attend and serve within their church, New Beginnings Christian Fellowship.

Governor Lucille Grimley was happy enough that the current threat of beaming had been taken care of, but that did not diminish her ire at the gang’s plan to kill people in Santa Fe. All but two of nine teams had been discovered and arrested and their cases of espionage were now being handled in federal court. She immediately began negotiations with her state legislature to increase funding for the New



Mexico State Police. She also began a project to create a higher-readiness anti-incursion team that while not large would be equipped with electronic and cyberwarfare assets. She also explored the temporary transfer of a certain Historic Preservation Division employee to the new team as an archival officer, a term she invented. Jim Pappas was happy to consider such a transfer if he would be allowed to resume his old position when the governor’s term of office ended and not lose his tenure. She was happy to ink these provisions into his new employment contract. “Jim,” she said, “If I have any more problems with my hand, I will expect to have a consultation with you.”

Two of the assassination teams had slipped back into Mexico, nothing to show for their time in Santa Fe, and the *Demônios* leadership was glad to get them back. The gang had lost twenty-one trained soldiers in the failed enterprise and their commercial productivity was taking a hit because of the lack of labor for product transport. The deep-cover leadership was annoyed at this dip in business. They had also lost Francis Xappa and Professor Hernández, and Heather Marcos, of whose status and whereabouts they were unaware.

Santa Maria Chapel’s new roof was completed and the diocese even funded a renovation of the interior, non-chapel spaces. Father Portacomaro was enjoying a new office, a small kitchen, and a new coffee-pod machine. He and Father Clark were still meeting with Cavern Fellowship pastors informally and felt no real need to report these contacts to their bishop, who didn’t seem to care much anyway.

One interesting detail rooted out of the iPad by the defense interception team in Brazil was that a setting of 150,000 cubic feet was logged into one of the plasmatization fire protocols. This was a curiosity to the team members but it was placed on the back burner considering the larger discovery of the weapon itself. They did not know that each missing church back in Santa Fe had a cavern of exactly that displacement.

Other mysteries of the saga remained. The origin of the drawing that Victor and Rosaria Moniz kept hidden was still an amazing secret. No one could guess where it had come from or who its artist was or why the drawing had a certain fluidity to it. The honey-like fragrance did not give itself to any rational or investigative discovery. It had mostly been forgotten at this point, by all except Karen Asnat. The flashing outlines were not solved although none of those who had seen them had

forgotten them. The viewing of them was filed in the minds of those on the helicopter that day as unexplained phenomena. The angel and his comrades knew the flashing answer and the event was no mystery to them. They loved that the archangel Michael had sent that signal to the humans, though the viewers did not know that.

Bob Cohen found a small apartment near downtown Santa Fe and Mindy McConnell was helping him furnish the one-bedroom flat. She kept saying, “I can find you some old appliance cartons for your living room,” which he did not think was funny. But they were having fun pretending that it would be a long-term address for the former SEAL and sometime digital journalist. They knew that otherwise would be the case. Among those who knew of his role in Hit-G, he was something of a hero. They two were often invited to the governor’s residence for dinner and Cohen received a quiet appointment to the governor’s new project: the HRAI team along with Jim Pappas.

State Trooper Avon Duvall was getting used to his return to a normal routine. He thought to himself, *a little monotony is a good thing,* as he wolfed down a breakfast burrito in his brand-new New Mexico State Police Dodge RAM which had been assigned for his use. His district chief had even arranged for a small addition to the truck: a small script embossed name below the driver’s side door handle: *Avon.*





107

A few weeks after the final drama, Jim Pappas and Karen Asnat found themselves in that field near the Hit-G site once again. It was a lovely, warm summer night. They sat in lawn chairs with a Coleman lantern and were talking and enjoying the evening. Around ten o’clock it seemed like the evening was over and they stood to pack up and leave. Suddenly, a warm glow formed at the now old-seeming hole in the ground. They stood still, fearing and exulting involuntarily. They had come to recognize this as a precursor to a visitation.

And it was so. The glow deepened and there in front of them stood Kuriosagapa who peered at them, through them. He smiled but did not speak, except to say in that distinct angelic tone of voice, “Behold.” They stood motionless but smiled back in a natural response. The angel gestured upward and they looked up into a cloudless sky that was black but for the stars. Then they saw what looked like shooting stars, flashing across the sky in concert. There appeared nothing random in their descent. The stars came down and settled in several places around the city, including where they were standing. The star settled into the hole, glowed, and then transformed. It became what looked like a building but not the one that had previously occupied this space. It was a wholly new structure, beautiful, gleaming.

The same thing happened at eleven other sites. New buildings, each different, grew out of the stars that fell. They formed, settled perfectly into the holes and the glow of each faded. Pappas and Asnat did not know what had happened but they knew that the angel was the agent who had arranged this. At once, they sensed a wonderful fragrance, sweet, natural, not strong but strangely like honey. Pappas quietly said, “I didn’t know honey had a smell.”

*The angel smiled then He said, “the mystery resolves with light but exults with trust. The Savior wishes you to continue with your friends to seek His kingdom and His righteousness. And the things that you need will be added to you.” There was a flash, and he was gone.*

Pappas and Asnat stood in the darkness. Inside the building was a warm glow. They walked to the main doors which were open. They cautiously walked into what

appeared to be a foyer. There was a wooden sign which said “Shalom Beit Lehem Fellowship.” Karen said in a whisper, “It sounds like our two Messianic synagogues have merged.”

“I had not heard that news,” Pappas said.

“Nor had I,” Karen agreed and smiled. “It would be nice, though.”

They walked through the building which was empty of any other people. It had a new smell. Then they decided to leave. They were in awe. They didn’t lock any doors because they didn’t know how to do so, and somehow felt no need. Pappas called Cohen and told him what had happened. Cohen said he would look into it and call him in the morning. It had been a powerful evening similar to an extraordinary Christmas eve, thought Pappas. He dropped Karen off at her apartment, the two agreeing to sleep on the matter and the next day, which was a Sunday, there would be plenty of time to absorb what was happening.

Oddly, Cohen thought not to investigate the news tip. A strange calmness came over him, and he decided to let the city discover on its own what Pappas had told him. He would get to report it soon enough. He didn’t even tell McConnell, who was in his new living room hanging pictures.

* * * * *

Maegan Grimley went to where she thought her church—Southwest Evangelical Free Church—was scheduled to meet on that Sunday. She arrived to find only a few there, but one member had received a text inviting them to come to the Hit-G where their former building had been. They all drove to that address to find a new building. It had wonderful appeal on approach, beyond the miracle of its overnight appearance. There was even a new parking lot. No one including Pastor Menendez had any explanation at all. They were milling about with looks of delight on their faces, peering at what had appeared. Maegan stood there, studying the structure. She said to the pastor, “This is my design!”

Menendez looked at her in surprise, looked at the facility, and then back at Maegan. “Yes, it is. Amazing! I see that.”

“How can this be?” she said and broke into tears of joy.



Across town in ten other locations worshippers were discovering new buildings at Hit-G sites. There were twelve new buildings, as some of the congregations had been meeting together, a thing decided by commonalities unknown before the Hit-G strike. Their pastors had been learning each other’s strengths, figuring out how to share duties with little friction about the merger. Now, those theoretically united bodies were given a new and adequate physical home. The aggregate joy felt among the Hit-G people was so great “you could have lit up the Santa Fe sky with it,” reflected Karen Asnat later as she learned of the other fellowships’ discoveries.

The news did not take long to reach Governor Grimley, who reached her daughter within the hour. They embraced and Maegan said, “Mom, this is my design, but I have no idea how this happened.”

The governor looked in amazement at the physical embodiment of her daughter’s creativity and genius. The two received more text messages from a number of people who also sent photos of the new buildings. It was a morning of celebration and wonderment that no one would forget for the rest of their lives. Santa Fe had been gifted twelve new facilities to replace the Hit-G churches, all in one night and with no explanation. Jim Pappas and Karen Asnat knew the source, but they told no one. Not yet anyway.

On that Sunday evening, Victor Moniz pulled the drawing out that Maegan Grimley had discovered. It was now blank and had the feel of a normal piece of vellum, nothing more. An inexplicable praise beyond words emanated from his heart, upward, to the God whom he trusted, loved and whose Son’s Kingdom he preached. He said to Rosaria, “I do not know what this is, or was, but let’s roll it up and keep it safe until Maegan asks for it back.” His wife agreed. Maegan never did.

* * * * *

Two months passed. The church people who had received new buildings were so full of happiness and worked hard to outfit their new facilities. The buildings even came with comfortable chairs. The church members reinvented old ministries and created new ones. The miraculous appearance of twelve new buildings in the city of Santa Fe, New Mexico had become national news and each facility had hundreds of curious visitors. Some of these came back in subsequent weeks. By now, the news cycle had moved on. The federal government was interested, suspicious even.

A few Congressional people suggested that something sinister must be at the root of the explanation. New Mexico's governor was not of that mindset. She was happy for her constituents and felt a strange sense of privilege that all this happened on her watch.

A wedding was happening on a late summer Saturday, in fact, a double wedding. Karen Asnat was marrying Jim Pappas, and Mindy McConnell was marrying Robert Cohen, in the same ceremony. There were about two hundred guests and the location was the new Santa Fe Christian Assembly building. Two pastors would officiate, and two Catholic priests were invited to offer opening and closing prayers. State Trooper Avon Duvall served as best man for each groom, Maegan Grimley was maid of honor for each bride and the governor of the state would administer the pronouncement: "In the sight of God and in the State of New Mexico, it is my privilege to pronounce you husbands and wives." She did so with tears in her eyes. A solo was sung by a woman, named Julianna Namara, who it turned out had an incredibly beautiful singing voice. She sang an old folk tune, "The Wedding Song," which had been penned long ago by the late Paul Stookey for his good friend and longtime singing partner Peter Yarrow. Julianna's rendition left no dry eye on this glorious day. "You really mowed us all down," said Cohen after the service was over.

* * * * *

In the almost 8,000 ft. elevation town of Mammoth Lakes, California, Maria Tomasia kicked her shoes off in the living room of her elegant but small condominium. She was reading a newspaper that featured the story of a wedding, which was billed as "icing on the happy cake" for that city over in New Mexico that had endured so much. She read about the ceremony and the participants. She read about the new buildings and how the Christian Assembly had been decorated for the ceremony. She read about the soloist, and her song that capped the event. She had tears in her eyes and whispered a prayer, "*Jesu Cristo*, if you are there, please come into my life now. I am *indigno de* I know, but if you can redeem my *prima*, perhaps you can redeem me too."

* * * * *



Victor Moniz pulled up to the facility of the Santa Fe Christian Assembly church. It was six o'clock on a Sunday morning, and he was first to arrive. There had been a hole in the ground at this address for almost three years, instantaneously and precisely excavated by a new and frightening technology. Then it became ragged and windburned. Now, there was a gorgeous new building—adequate space but not ostentatious, cleverly planned and laid out but not over-designed, tastefully outlined in the early sunrise but not dominant for the area—reminding Moniz of something he had read long before, about architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who wanted his designs to flow out of the natural surroundings of their addresses. This building was that. The pastor delighted in the drive up to the new church. These past few weeks, arriving and viewing the miracle each time, placed him in a worshipful mindset, no matter what he may face among his congregation that morning. He could not help but extol his God, and His only begotten Son.

Finis

## About the Author

Neil Damgaard grew up in northern Virginia, near Washington D.C. He is a graduate of Virginia Tech (B.S. in Industrial Engineering and Operations Research) and Dallas Theological Seminary (Master of Theology and Doctor of Ministry). A retired minister, he has authored *A History of Dartmouth Bible Church (1963-2013), Defiance at Cairo* (in tribute to his parents), and served as editor for *Wounded Faith: Understanding and Healing from Spiritual Abuse.* He has also written a number of scholarly works, all of which are posted on his website, DrNeilDamgaard.com. Having served as senior pastor of Dartmouth Bible Church for 36 years he also served as Protestant Chaplain in the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Massachusetts for over 12 years. He now lives in Virginia with his lovely wife, Renée (to whom he has been married since 1975) and together they have raised two wonderful daughters, Jocelyn and Susanna. They also enjoy the company of mini-Poodle Halsey.

# Proof